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BESIDE THE RIVER.

VOL. I.

“ For love is a celestiall harmonie  
Of likely harts composed of starres concent,  
Which joyne together in sweet sympathie,  
To work each others joy and true content,  
Which they have harbour’d since their first descent  
Out of their heavenly bowers, where they did see  
And know ech other here below’d to bee.  
Then wrong it were that any other twaine  
Should in Loves gentle band combyned bee  
But those whom Heaven did at first ordaine,  
And made out of one mould the more t’agree;  
For all, that like the beautie which they see,  
Straight do not love; for Love is not so light  
As streight to burne at first beholders sight.”

*Spenser's Hymne in Honour of Beautie.*

# BESIDE THE RIVER

A TALE

BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID

AUTHOR OF

“PATTY,” “DIANE,”

“IN THE SWEET SPRING TIME,”

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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1881.

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TO

R. BARRETT BROWNING.

My dear Mr. Browning,

*I think you will take a lively interest in the  
scenery through which this Story moves, and  
I offer the book to you in remembrance of some  
happy autumn days beside a river.*

Sincerely yours,

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID.

STANLEY PLACE, CHELSEA.

March 1st., 1881.

*With very kind regards*

M. S. M.

*March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1881*

your day 5 Dec 55 Bremmell-36.  
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# BESIDE THE RIVER.

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## CHAPTER I.

### ON THE MEUSE.

LIGHT is fading on the river, the water has lost the opal brightness of half-an-hour ago. But for the swiftly moving current one might think the spacious valley borders a lake, for the broad river turns abruptly at each end, and the steep wooded hills on either side of it close so completely that there seems no outlet from the still lonely beauty of the place.

Across the broad stream, the green hills are very lofty, irregular in outline, and almost perpendicular. Birch trees clothe

their dark sides, and among the light foliage here and there the earth shows purple, or else huge crags peer forward—a warm grey against the slender satin birch stems. The trees grow down the steeply descending hillside almost to the brink of the river, and their reflections in this waning light are spreading a uniform olive tint on the surface of the water.

On the near side the cliffs recede in the form of a crescent, leaving space for a small meadow between them and the river, and in this meadow, nearer the water than the hills, stands a small white-washed cottage, with green shutters and doors, its only peculiarity being that the thatched gable is not equal in its slopes,—the long side stretches out to shelter a cow-house with an arched doorway facing the river. The cottage seems a part of the solitude of the place, it is as still as all the rest, only the whirr of a beetle's wing or the leap of a fish in the swift-flowing water

gives a sign of life ; even the bird in the green cage beside the door seems asleep.

A sudden break comes into the stillness. The cottage door opens, and the click click of knitting needles sounds distinctly from within. All at once the noise stops, there is a sound of hearty kissing, and then of a fresh young voice—

“Come now, grandmother,” it says, “you stick too close to Edmond’s socks, come out with me a bit while I fetch Merette home.”

The voice has grown more distinct, and now there stands in the doorway, relieved against the dark background of the room, a girl of more than middle height, and of rounded graceful shape. She looks about twenty, and in spite of her pale complexion is full of health and youth ; she is not perhaps pretty, but there is much charm in the sweet thoughtful face with its dark eyes and fair hair, a charm that clings to the memory of those who have once seen Jeanne Lahaye,

with more tenacity than mere prettiness would. She looks full of vigorous life and brightness, and yet a certain dainty grace that accompanies her movements keeps this robustness within feminine limits.

The grandmother raises her kerchief-covered head and smiles at the young girl ; hers is such a still wan face that the sudden smile seems to galvanize it into life ; she shakes her head, and a gleam of mockery shows in her pale blue eyes.

“ My old legs cannot match your young ones,” she says in a cracked voice. “ Wait till Edmond comes, and he’ll fetch Merette home.”

Jeanne laughs gaily—“ Yes, yes, Edmond will be here soon. But why cannot you come too, grandmother ?”

The old woman’s pale straight face stiffens, she looks searchingly into the girl’s clear dark eyes. Then grasping with one hand a stick which rests against

the arm of her chair she gets up, with difficulty, clutching at Jeanne's arm for help. "Since you want me, child, I will come."

Side by side age and youth walk slowly down the gentle green slope that lies between the cottage and the swiftly flowing river, to where a pale fawn-coloured cow stands with her feet in the clear water drinking.

"Dear Merette, she has not gone far," Jeanne said. "I thought, grandmother, you should for once see how pretty she looks as she stands drinking in the clear water, with a reflection like a twin Merette. I often wish I could paint her picture."

The old woman stood gazing at the cow without speaking for a minute or two.

"Jeanne," the girl started as the thin voice broke the stillness of the valley, sleeping now in the olive light spread down its dark sides, and over the clear water, "you will never desert me, Jeanne."

The girl laughed, a hearty reassuring laugh of utter incredulity at the idea suggested, but the truth shining out of her brown eyes was even more convincing to her questioner.

“Why, grandmother, what do you mean?” she said, “you are foolish to-night; to begin with, whom could I go to if I left you? no one would be plagued with me, you have so spoiled me since I left the convent.”

The grandmother’s pale blue eyes looked from out the deep caverns into which age had sunk them. “Are you sure you do not want to leave me, Jeanne? It is a dull life here for a bright young girl. But,” her thin voice grew shriller yet with agitation, and Jeanne felt the withered arm tremble within her own firm clasp, “I can keep you, child, while you are willing to stay here with me; what I have could not keep you and me too if it were divided, and it would not suffice in a town as it does here, in the country.”

Jeanne was shaking her head in merry disapproval.

“What is the matter this evening, grandmother? do you really think I could leave you and Merette?”

The cow came slowly up from the water, and when it reached Jeanne, rubbed its head lovingly against her shoulder. Jeanne slipped one plump arm round its neck and kissed it between the eyes. “Yes, my Merette,” she said in a soft purring voice, “even grandmother talks nonsense sometimes, you must help me to scold her, Merette.” The cow shook her head as if she understood. “Oh, if I only had your picture, my beauty. Grandmother, Monsieur Vidonze said, the last time I saw him, he would photograph Merette, as well as me, the next time he came.”

Madame Delimoy’s face changed suddenly, and one saw at a glance how stern those pale straight features and sunken eyes could look.

“Monsieur Vidonze ! Bah !” her voice had a harsh scoff in it. “He knows nothing about photographing, see what a fright he made of you. I tell you, Jeanne,” in a vexed suspicious tone, “I’ll not have a vagabond do-nothing like Antoine Vidonze loitering here again.”

Jeanne raised her soft cheek from the cow’s neck, and turning a laughing face on the angry old woman, said,

“What has he done, poor fellow, I thought you liked him.”

But Madame Delimoy had recovered herself.

“He is good for nothing,” she said sharply, “he is not worth talking of.”

Jeanne turned away, still smiling, and Merette followed, filling the air with sweet milky fragrance and soft lowings.

“I wonder why grandmother is angry,” Jeanne thought ; “Monsieur Vidonze is not amusing, but I do want a likeness of Merette.”



The broad arched door of the cow-house stood open, and Merette passed on to her comfortable lodging, and her bed of green broom shoots. Jeanne lingered longer than usual with the cow. She had lived with her grandmother for the last four years, and this was the first time she had seen her really angry. The girl's frank fearlessness kept the atmosphere bright and unclouded, she and her mother had always understood one another, and she had never learned the art of disputing. But Madame Lahaye had gone to join the husband who had died some years earlier, and when Jeanne left the convent where she had been taught, she had come to live with her grandmother.

They got on very well together, though the girl sometimes wished she could find out what lay under the old woman's cold and often sarcastic manner. But then, if Madame Delimoy rarely showed affection and never praised, she also never blamed

her grandchild. This was the first time that Jeanne could remember to have had her will thwarted.

“Something has vexed her that I know nothing about,” she thought; the serene look came back to her sweet face; she said good night to Merette, and closed the cow-house door.

As she turned round, the smile warmed into a delighted expression, and a rich glow flushed her cheeks. There stood talking to her grandmother a tall slender young fellow, dressed in a short jacket, dark brown velveteen trousers, and a rush-plaited high-crowned hat on his head. His large dark eyes were fixed on the cow-stable, and as they met Jeanne’s, the impatient look left them.

He nodded to Madame Delimoy, and went forward to meet Jeanne.

“You come at last,” he said, as they shook hands. “I thought that you had gone to bed with that precious

cow, no one has a chance beside her."

Jeanne nodded, but she looked saucy.

"Dear, pretty Merette, how can I help loving her, she would be a sweet bed-fellow. I care for her next best to grandmother."

"*Méchante*," he said, shaking his head at her.

Jeanne laughed.

"Of course I do, and is it not right and just? She gives us milk and butter, and she loves me; she never strays. I take her to pasture every morning and fetch her in to be milked; then I take her down to water and fetch her in for the night; and never once has she tried to have any will but mine; tell me, my friend, would any two-legged friend be half as amiable as Merette? I do not think so."

"She talks folly," the old woman said, for they now stood beside her; "lead me in, Edmond, and then you can come out to Jeanne."

"What! tired already, grandmother?"

the girl said as the old woman turned to the cottage, leaning heavily on Edmond's arm ; but Jeanne was very happy, for the evening visits of Edmond Dupuis had grown to be the best part of her life.

The young fellow had moored his boat to the white post where the cow had stood, and now Jeanne went slowly to the post, and begun uncoiling the rope he had fastened round it.

Edmond came hurrying from the cottage before she had finished ; his dark eyes glowing, and a rich colour on his cheeks. No words were spoken till Jeanne was seated in the boat, and he began to row her slowly down the river ; the two friends sat smiling at one another.

"Let me have an oar," the girl said, presently.

"You shall have them both, if you will promise not to row me into the bushes."

Changing places with her he gave up the oars, and Jeanne's pale face glowed with pretty triumph as the boat shot forward under her strong even strokes. Edmond sat watching her, his great gipsy-like eyes following every movement, but though there was an easy fellowship of manner between these two that might have been mistaken for relationship, the expression of those deep glowing, dark eyes was not that of a brother. Edmond Dupuis had known Jeanne for two years, and she was fond of saying that they must be related, because grandmother seemed to belong to Edmond as much as she belonged to her.

Madame Delimoy had known Edmond's mother, and it was very pleasant to him to talk to some one who remembered his early home.

He had lost both father and mother in his childhood, and it always seemed strange and fortuitous that the first ac-

quaintance he made in Rimay should have been Madame Delimoy. She was far less feeble two years ago, and one afternoon when she was sitting chatting in the parlour of his landlady, Madame Boulotte, the comely dame began to sing the praises of her lodger, Monsieur Dupuis, the young engineer, who had come from Namur to help in making the new railway.

Madame Delimoy recognised the name of Dupuis, when he came in soon after, and was introduced to Monsieur Edmond. It had always been surprising to Jeanne that her reserved grandmother should have invited a stranger to the cottage ; but Edmond quickly seemed to be at home, and he and she were soon like brother and sister. He had been brought up by his cousin, Jules Baconfoy, an innkeeper at Namur, but though the cousin was kind, he was a bachelor, and eccentric ; and till Edmond became acquainted with Jeanne

Lahaye and her grandmother, he had not known the sweetness which women bring to home life.

At first he had come to the cottage every Sunday ; but lately he came on week days also, sometimes every other day ; and Jeanne began to wonder how she had lived without his visits—they seemed the great events in her monotonous existence.

The two friends had always something left from last time to talk over, and each was sure to have some special need to consult the other before they again met.

Madame Delimoy had looked on well pleased to see the children, as she called them, happy together.

Edmond Dupuis amused her, and she was always glad to see him, for he was very amusing and clever, with that sort of ready wit and pleasant adaptable talent which finds an outlet in all society and sympathy with everyone.

Jeanne went on rowing with earnest face and strained muscles, so absorbed in her efforts that she forgot her companion ; all at once she pulled both oars into the boat and broke into a merry laugh.

“ Why don’t you speak, Edmond ? you are as mum as a mouse, you have been quite silent these ten minutes ; I did not know you could keep so quiet. Are you ill ? ”

She tried to look grave, but the saucy dimples round her mouth would not be smoothed away.

“ Jeanne,” he said abruptly, “ shall you miss me if I do not come next Sunday ? ”

He kept his eyes fixed on her face, and the change he saw there satisfied him. Jeanne looked half frightened, half ready to cry.

“ Not come on Sunday ! why not, what are you going to do ? are you going anywhere with Madame Boulotte ? ”



He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“I should not give you up for Madame Boulotte. No, I had a note from my cousin Jules this morning; he tells me if I come to Namur at once I shall hear something to my advantage.”

“Does he say no more than that?”

Edmond shook his head as if it were the best joke in the world.

“No, if you had seen him you would know that, good fellow as he is, Jules Baconfoy takes a certain grim pleasure in teasing me—but he is the best friend I have—and I know he is always trying to help me—he has good news now,” the young fellow spoke warmly.

“Then why did you not go to him at once?”

Edmond took the oars and motioned the girl to sit in his place—then he gave her a look full of reproach.

“Upon my word, Jeanne,” he said, “I thought you would be disappointed if I did

not come here this evening, and this is your appreciation, is it ?”

Jeanne left off laughing.

“ Yes, it is very kind of you, but even to please me you must not vex your cousin, though he does hate women. You will certainly go to-morrow, will you not ?”

“ Perhaps,” he smiled ; “ why, what a woman of business you would make, Jeanne, a regular driver ! I had not thought of going for several days.”

Jeanne blushed shyly.

“ You know best, no doubt,” she said ; “ but indeed, Edmond, I should not like to hurry or to be a woman of business ; I only meant I do not want to be selfish.”

He gave her a loving, grateful glance.

“ You could not be that if you tried,” he said, tenderly ; then, suddenly changing his tone, he laughed. “ Your grandmother and Merette do not give selfishness time to grow in. I fancy you have always so much

to do for one or the other that there is not much chance for anyone else."

"Poor Merette! you always have a rap at her; it is mean of you to be jealous of a cow. But we must go home, must we not, my friend?"

While they had been talking the shadows had grown deeper on the water, the hills on either side of the valley looked more solid and inaccessible, and the post and the wall of the cottage stood in glaring whiteness amid the gloom.

"Not just yet," and Edmond rowed on past the landing-post. "Suppose I am away a week, shall you miss me?"

"Edmond?" It seemed to Jeanne that he must be joking to ask such a question, and she looked up laughing—expecting to see his dark eyes sparkling with merry mischief; she met instead a look full of reproach; but the next moment he said brightly,

"Of course if you have Merette, you don't want anyone else, that is plain."

“Of course not,” said Jeanne lightly, but she was thinking of Edmond’s eyes. She had scarcely ever seen them serious before. What power of expression there was in their dark velvet-like depth! How beautiful they were!—for Jeanne, like many a woman only moderately gifted with good looks almost worshipped actual beauty, and certainly Edmond Dupuis, with his delicate richly coloured skin, his clustering chestnut hair and darker beard, and his marvellous dark eyes—eyes like those which Andersen calls “beautiful dark lakes,” was an ideal of youthful beauty. He was tall too, and straight, and well made; as they again neared the landing-place, and he flung the rope round the post and stood drawing the boat closer in shore, he looked full of grace and strength.

It was lighter here; on this side of the cottage a narrow valley opened in the dark hill behind it, indistinct just now

from a veil of blue mist, which seemed to indicate that here was the home of the trickling thread of water that meandered among the purple crocuses in the meadow.

“Good night, Jeanne,” Edmond said, holding the girl’s hand clasped in his as she passed him to get out of the boat. “I will come as soon as I get back from Namur, and that may be on Sunday—who knows?”

“I wish you good speed,” she said. “I shall so much want to know what Monsieur Jules has to tell you. Good-bye.”

She stood watching till the boat was out of sight. She sighed as she turned back to the cottage.

Something had fallen across the brightness that Edmond usually left behind him. She seemed all at once to have become old and anxious.

“Will he come back?” she thought, “will he?”

## CHAPTER II.

## IN HOPE.

MADAME BOULOTTE is more disturbed than she cares to feel. For Madame Boulotte has a theory that worry or any mental disquiet tells unfavourably on the outward appearance: wrinkles the forehead, brings puckers and creases to the corners of the eyes and mouth, and, when much indulged in, even alters the shape of the lips.

Strong feelings and impulsive natures, she argues, invariably age the outward appearance, and perhaps she is right. At any rate, since the due and respectable

amount of grief she showed at her husband's death some fifteen years ago, Madame Boulotte has not worried or allowed herself to be strongly moved, and she is one of the best preserved women in Belgium. No one knows how old she is. But sometimes when you meet her coming from Mass, with her veil down, she may be taken (except that her well proportioned figure is rather full) for five-and-twenty. To-day, however, fighting with care that will not be driven out, Madame Boulotte looks forty.

Madame Boulotte is very handsome still; though she is not tall she has a queenly aspect, her square, well-shaped head is admirably placed on her shoulders; her fair hair is arranged in stiffly frizzed curls, and these, with her clearly-defined eyebrows, her pale blue eyes, and aquiline nose, give her rather the air of a marquise of bygone days, and make one think of powder and patches, of a hoop and red

heels. Madame Boulotte is, however, simply dressed in black silk; pearl earrings, a handsome diamond ring shining on her finger, and shining steel buckles in her shoes, are the only ornaments she wears.

She is speaking now to her freckled, red-haired *bonne*, who for the twelfth time has come to ask when Monsieur Edmond is expected. "He has been away a fortnight, and he only went for three days," she says.

Madame Boulotte gives a calm smile. She says to herself with a touch of sarcasm, "See what a favourite he is! one might have thought Marie would have been glad of less work to do, and yet here she comes every day to worry me with the same question, as if I am not worried enough as to what has become of him.

"Marie," she says aloud; "do not trouble yourself, go about your business; Monsieur Dupuis will give due notice before he returns; he would never take us by surprise."

Madame Boulotte is sitting at a small



round table in the middle of her parlour, with her back to the door; but at a little cry from the much-enduring Marie, she turns round and sees Monsieur Dupuis as he comes into the room.

Madame Boulotte does not look surprised. She is ever calm and courteous. She holds out her soft, plump hand to her truant lodger.

“ You are welcome, Monsieur Edmond; but what has happened to you ?”

Then she sees how disturbed the young fellow looks—rather agitated than anxious—though his face is full of unspoken projects, and she asks no more questions.

“ Your room is ready, Monsieur, for we have expected you every day.” This is all the reproach she permits herself. “ You will tell me all your news after supper. Marie, Monsieur Edmond will sup with me.”

“ Pardon me, Madame,” he seems to remember for the first time that he has been neglectful; “ I know I ought to have writ-

ten to you, but I had no notion that I should be away so long—I am very sorry. But, Madame, I cannot have the pleasure of supping with you, I am engaged this evening, you will have me to-morrow instead—I know you will.” He gives her a sweet look out of his liquid dark eyes.

Madame Boulotte looks at him quietly ; not the faintest tinge of colour appears on her cheeks ; no movement of her lips betrays her mortification ; but she is grieved. She believes herself to be the confidant of the charming young fellow’s joys and sorrows. Has she not tried to replace to him his lost mother—no, hardly that, conscience whispers ; she has been a sweeter and more original companion, a *rôle* which Madame Boulotte thinks no other woman would have been able to enact so well—mother, sister, friend, all in one, with just the restraint that heightens interest and makes influence more lasting, yet without a tinge of nonsense or flirting.

Surely she has a right to know all he has been doing at Namur. But she takes no notice of his refusal to sup with her.

“And how is Monsieur Baconfoy, poor man?” she asks, for Edmond has seated himself at the table, and has begun to play with her scissors. “Is he as great a woman-hater and fossil as ever?”

Edmond laughs and looks mischievous. “He is, if possible, worse than ever; he said the other day that he could see no reason for the existence of women as reasonable beings. I dare not tell you half of his heresies.”

“Ah! he has no one to contradict him,” says Madame Boulotte, calmly. “Men never contradict one another’s folly. Be sure, my friend, that that man in his youth has loved in vain, and therefore, as the right woman could not be had by him, he refuses to believe in any other; but, *ma foi*, he is not a man,” she adds with an air of superb disdain, “he is a mummy.”

“Nevertheless, Madame,” Edmond rises up and moves towards the door, “he is a fine specimen of flesh and blood, and he has a good heart under his cynicism. “Who knows, Madame,” he says laughingly, “what might happen if you undertook his conversion, you might do wonders with him.”

She looks at him earnestly, it has never occurred to her that her friend Edmond could laugh at her, and yet this sounds like ridicule. She draws herself up slightly.

“I am not strong-minded, Monsieur Edmond, I do not profess to teach. It is only where my affections are interested that I can give help or advice. No, Monsieur Baconfoy would find as much to overcome in me as I should in him before we could even begin to talk to one another.”

Edmond laughs. “I am sure you would convert him,” he says. “You must have more faith in yourself.”

As he goes out of the room, he thinks, "I believe these two would get on excellently if they would only make acquaintance—he would manage her, and she would give in; she is too much for me."

He was really afraid of his landlady to-day; he felt that she had become aware that some trouble disturbed him. All through his short life—he was only twenty four—he had been content to let himself drift along the channel created by circumstances. His cousin had, he knew, used to the best advantage the small sum left him by his parents, to complete his education and to place him in his profession, and he had accepted his cousin's propositions without comment. His work at Rimay was only temporary; but he had given himself up to the full enjoyment of his life there, and had shut his eyes to the future. He had gone on this long time in a dreamy happiness, knowing that his visits to the cottage by the river gave to

life a something that it had wanted before, and never troubling himself to find out how much he cared for Jeanne Lahaye.

And now he knew that his happy dream was over. A much better post had been offered him close to Namur, and though he had been expecting, and desiring even, a rise in position, this prospect of change had come on him with the force of a shock; shattering his blissful dream, and leaving a weight of care in its place.

He rowed along, out of tune this afternoon with the lovely river and its banks, full just now of light and shade—his heart was filled with Jeanne. It seemed as if a new sight had come to him; the dream-like past no longer blinded him to what had been all this while the aim of each day's hope. Looking back, he saw how the thought of Jeanne had lightened his daily labour, and how the certainty of those evenings with her had put a shield between

him and all the petty vexations of life. At the thought a smile spread over his face—he looked in that moment an ideal of youth and hope. Why should not Jeanne be his wife? “I cannot live without her—I will not,” he thought passionately. “She has been used to poverty—she will not expect a rich home.”

The new post he had accepted, he argued, justified him in marrying; he could live frugally, and in a few years probably his income would be doubled.

“Jeanne will consent, I know,” he murmured. A sudden fear made him pale, but he smiled at it. “My love must compel Jeanne’s; yes she loves me, I am sure of it,” and he began to row with rapid, vigorous strokes. He could scarcely bear delay now, his impulsive nature always urged him to immediate action; what he wished must surely happen. He was soon beside the white post, but there was no sign of Jeanne or of Merette, and the light told

him that probably they might not come down to the river for some time.

He had resolved to speak to Jeanne first, without consulting Madame Delimoy, but now it seemed as if he might as well go to the cottage, and get his talk with the old woman over. Jeanne would be sure to refer him to her, so it would save time. He smiled again at a certain uneasiness he felt, as he laid his hand on the latch of the cottage door. Madame Delimoy always agreed with him, why should she differ from him now, when his object was to make her grandchild happy?



## CHAPTER III.

## A SACRIFICE.

HE waited a second or two, and then he went in, bringing a stream of sunshine into the dimly-lighted cottage. Though logs still smouldered on the hearth, smoke rather than light came from them. Edmond's eyes at first could hardly make out Madame Delimoy, her black gown and dark apron were so much in harmony with the gloom. She had a handkerchief too tied over her cap, and a dark shawl crossed over her bosom, but the pale pink of her face and hands relieved itself, and

all at once he saw that the pale blue eyes were searching his face.

“Good evening, Madame,” he said, and the old woman held out a trembling bony hand, “I am so glad to see you again,” he looked, with a pleasant smile, at the old woman.

“You have come back?” she said, and her tone put surprise into the words.

“I did not expect to be away so long, Madame, or I should have said so. How is Jeanne? I suppose she has gone to fetch Merette.”

He meant to speak quietly, but his words hurried along quite regardless of his intentions; the smile had gone, and he looked anxious.

Madame Delimoy’s scanty eyebrows arched, and a smile curved her thin lips. She noticed the change in Edmond.

“Yes, she always fetches Merette, as you know; she is as well as usual, I thank you.”

He had always been a great favourite

with Madame Delimoy, and now he was conscious that she was not in sympathy with him, but he could not stay to reflect.

“I have news to tell her and you, Madame,” he went on quickly. “My work is over at Rimay, and a post is offered to me some way off. I shall have to live at Namur,” he paused, but Madame Delimoy sat motionless, her pale eyes still searching his face.

“Madame,” he burst out suddenly, “you have always been kind to me, you must guess what I have to say, and what I want—I want Jeanne to be my wife.”

Except that she looked graver, Madame Delimoy showed no emotion.

“You will give your consent, will you not?” he went on. “You must have seen how happy we make one another, you would have parted us before if you had meant to disapprove of our love.”

“I have seen nothing to approve and disapprove;” the thin voice was very cold.

“Are you able to keep a wife, Monsieur Dupuis? Jeanne’s fortune is not worth speaking of, and till my death she has nothing at all.”

He raised his hand as if he would deprecate such a thought as money, his handsome young face flushed.

“I only want Jeanne,” he said eagerly. “Yes, I have enough, she and I can live almost as cheaply in my lodgings as I do alone, and when I am richer she shall have a little house of her own; we will often come and see you, Madame.”

There was no answer; something in the stillness of his listener struck compunction into his ardour, and he added hastily, “Yes, we will often come.”

Still there was no answer; Madame Delimoy’s eyes had left his face and were gazing at the smouldering logs.

“Will you not answer me?” he said impatiently; “will you not say you wish me to marry Jeanne?”

“*A quoi bon,*” she gave the cold cynical laugh which so disturbed her grandchild. “Whether I like it or not, you will ask Jeanne to marry you, and it is her answer, not mine, which you will abide by. You wish to part me from my grandchild. Do you look for my thanks for this, Monsieur Dupuis?”

Edmond took both her hands, and pressed them in his. His eyes were full of sweetness, but Madame Delimoy would not meet them.

“Do not be angry,” he said, “and do not call me Monsieur Dupuis, I am your son Edmond, you do give me Jeanne; how can I thank you, you will have two children instead of one; but I am beside myself with impatience till I hear Jeanne’s answer. Shall I find her in the valley do you think?”

Madame Delimoy paused. “You can look for her there,” she said stiffly.

Edmond kissed one of the trembling hands, and then he went out. “After all,”

he thought, "the old woman is right, it is useless to worry her, only Jeanne can give me the answer I want." He stood hesitating, he knew that Jeanne sometimes came down the little valley behind the cottage, but she came oftener from the hillside, for the goats and Merette were fond of climbing ; for once he paused to reflect ; if he missed Jeanne, and had to come back in search of her, the delay would be so much longer. He was troubled, and while he stood waiting, his kind heart suffered for Madame Delimoy.

"No doubt it will be hard for her to part with Jeanne, "and yet," he said, "it would be worse for me than for her ; it will only be the same for her as it was before Jeanne came, life would end for me if I lost Jeanne ;" and then he stamped with impatience. If he only knew where to look for Jeanne ! He soon grew tired of waiting, and went up the valley beside the trickling stream. Presently he heard Jeanne's clear voice

singing overhead; he moved across to the other side of the path, and he saw her.

She was seated on a bare projecting spur of rock, above and below her was an abundance of purple heather, nearer the path came the thick ledge of bracken, a golden brown in the afternoon sun; and lower yet, growing down to the edge of the footpath, was a skirting of oak, evidently offshoots from some former masters of the soil. Two goats browsed near her.

"Jeanne, Jeanne," he called out, and Jeanne rose quickly to her feet. Her hair shone like a nimbus round her head in the level light; she looked a grand figure with her closely clinging black skirts, relieved against the crimson heather. She had grown rosy with joy at the unexpected sound of Edmond's voice.

"Felix," she said to the little boy lying in the heather at her feet, "you

can bring Merette home in half-an-hour, the goats may stay longer, I am going."

For the first time the girl was ashamed of her own feelings; she could not have given a reason, and yet she tried to hide this joy that made every fibre of her body thrill; she conquered, and when she reached the end of the path where Edmond stood, waiting to jump her down from the high bank on to the slaty road below, she was outwardly quiet; she smiled at him saucily.

"Well, you are really come, Mr. Truant, we had given you up for lost."

He did not answer. Jeanne looked up at him, and grew subdued at once when she saw how grave his face was; she thought it was more beautiful, even during all this time of absence, than she had been dreaming it was; it was overcast with a pensive melancholy. Jeanne's heart smote her for having begun by teasing.

"Is anything the matter, Edmond?" she



said, anxiously ; “ don’t mind my foolish words.”

He looked away—he had not quite planned how to begin, and it had jarred upon him to hear her sing so happily in his absence. He began to walk slowly down the valley towards the meadow, without looking at Jeanne as she walked beside him.

“ I do not know yet,” he said, “ whether I have cause for sorrow ; but I am anxious, my friend.”

Jeanne listened for more, this new mood disturbed her. Edmond had told her once or twice of some petty trouble ; but usually their talk had been playful ; now he walked on silently.

“ I will tell you presently,” he said at last, and he gave her a long glance.

Jeanne felt tormented ; a tinge of colour flickered on her clear skin.

“ You are mysterious,” she said ; but she did not say it in her usual lively fashion. They had now reached the opening of the

valley, and Jeanne was going on as if to cross the meadow on her way to the boat.

Edmond put his hand on her arm. "We will not go to the boat to-night, I can tell you better here. How lonely this place is!" He looked round at the cottage, and then turned away from it. "It is hardly safe for two women to live alone so far from help in case of need."

Jeanne smiled at his grave face; she did not understand his mood. "No one would ever harm us; everyone knows we are poor, and all grandmother's treasures are safe with Madame Boulotte. What is this new fancy?" she said, and then she laughed; "you take a gloomy view of things to-day, my friend, tell me what has been happening to you at Namur? Monsieur Baconfoy has not had good news for you, I fear."

He kept behind her so that she should not see his face, and Jeanne turned back towards the cottage.

“I know something troubles you,” she said earnestly ; “let us go to grandmother, she is so wise, she can find a cure for every trouble.”

“Stay,” he said hastily, “I must tell you alone—come this way.” And he began to cross the meadow where the pale purple crocus blossoms showed thickest.

Jeanne stooped and began to gather some of the delicate flowers. Edmond turned and looked at her ; he frowned and bit his lip. Instead of following him she stood gazing at the orange centres of the flowers. He walked back, snatched them from her hand, and flung them impatiently on the grass.

“Your friendship is not worth having,” he said impetuously. “I tell you that I am anxious ; that I want to speak to you, and, instead of listening, you play with flowers.”

Jeanne’s face flushed, and her eyes

opened wide with wonder; she laughed when he left off speaking, then suddenly changing, "My friend, you are certainly not yourself to-night," she said tenderly. "Come in and let grandmother cure you."

Edmond muttered some words which were not complimentary to the grandmother's wisdom; then he tried to control himself.

"Forgive me, my friend," he said. "I am rough and rude; but you are so indulgent, and—Jeanne, I am wretched—you alone, dear one, can cure my trouble, if you will; but will you?"

"What use can I be?" she laughed, a little nervously. "I can read, and cook, and sew, and I can play a little on the piano, and I can mind Merette; but—but—I am not wise at giving advice, like grandmother."

"You are all the wisdom I want," he cried passionately—he bent over her and clasped both her hands in his, while his

deep, glowing eyes seemed to devour her. "We have been long with closed eyes in Paradise; let us open them and be real with one another. Jeanne, I love you more than I can say. I must have you for my wife."

The weakness had left his face; he looked full of passion and power; as if he would compel the love he asked.

The rosy colour flew into the girl's face. At first she seemed stupefied; then she drew her hand from his.

"I—I cannot be your wife," she said in a low voice, "I do not wish to marry." She did not think of Edmond, she was thinking of the promise she had made to her grandmother.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he cried angrily. "Jeanne, Jeanne, do you wish to put this cruel end to our friendship?"

The girl's face, now pale as a lily, was lifted to his; her heart fluttered so wildly

she could scarcely speak, the pain seemed more than she could bear.

“Ah, no, indeed; why need our friendship end?” She looked confused—frightened; but she did not know why she was so troubled.

“Because I love you; because I want you for my wife; because I cannot live without you. I am going away, Jeanne, and I cannot leave you behind. Tell me, dearest, that you love me, that I may go and ask your grandmother’s consent to marry you.”

His arm stole round her waist—she did not stir, she was very pale, and her lips trembled.

“Going away!” she said, “can you be in earnest? oh! no, Edmond.” She moved gently from him.

“In earnest, Jeanne! God knows how much,” he took her hand again. “Child, can you not understand what I feel? I have suffered enough in this absence.

I want you all to myself, you are the joy of my life, you will say Yes, dearest—come, my Jeanne, my best beloved ;” he kissed the hand he held, and Jeanne’s heart throbbed still more, “let us go together to your grandmother.”

Suddenly Jeanne clasped her other hand over his and held him fast. The struggle within was terrible.

“Please listen,” she said ; the stillness of her voice chilled his rising hope. “I do love you, Edmond, indeed I do. You are my very dear friend—but—but grandmother comes first. I should be ungrateful to her. I could not leave her, even for you. You will not be away long, you will come back, and we shall be happy again ; it is very hard to lose you—but”—she forced a smile, for she thought that she would not grieve him by showing her own sorrow. “Yes, my friend, you will soon come back.”

Edmond was too full of his own feel-

ings to understand that perhaps Jeanne's lay out of sight. Her words seemed to him like a sentence of death—they seemed to prove her want of love. He stood looking at her in despairing silence.

“Do not be angry with me,” said the girl, “I am your friend; oh, yes, I will always be your friend, *I* could not be angry with you without just cause. Please forgive me, I shall miss you sadly, God knows—but you will come back.”

She gave him a little look, and then turned away. Her eyes were full of hot blinding tears.

But Edmond was maddened with disappointment.

“I shall never come back,” he said, “you are cruel-hearted, you are wicked, Jeanne—you have deceived me, you have let me go on loving you all this while, you must have known that I did not think of you only as a friend—I love you, I have always loved you with my heart's best



love, you are first, before all the world to me—and you—you will not give up your grandmother for me. *Mon Dieu!* was there ever such selfishness?" he turned away with a bitter look on his face.

Jeanne was deeply touched, and her thoughts were in tumult; she did not understand the new, disturbed shyness she felt towards Edmond. She could not at once have said she loved him, she had not thought of love, but her heart was full of him; a new soft tenderness welled up at his words—if he had been patient, love would quickly have made his presence felt. But at the name of her grandmother, duty mastered the girl's emotion—even for Edmond she could not break the promise she had given to Madame Delimoy.

"No, Edmond, I cannot leave her," she said sadly, but, though her lips quivered, she kept back her tears.

He gave her an angry glance, he could not see the trembling, swelling heart—so

full of the trouble it could not understand—the pent up tears she so bravely tried to hide from him. He fancied that Jeanne was cold as a stone, and he turned away in despair; without even saying adieu he hurried to the river, unfastened the rope, jumped into the boat, and pulled off towards Rimay.

## CHAPTER IV.

MADAME BOULOTTE.

IT was in September that Edmond Dupuis left the river side in such a stormy mood, and, though the new year has come, he has never returned to make peace with Jeanne La Haye.

The time has gone very slowly with the young girl; her grandmother gets deafer and more infirm, and will sit for hours without speaking a word. Jeanne fancies that she looks at her sternly as if she suspected her secret trouble, for a sore trouble weighs on the girl's bright spirit. She pines after Edmond. Her every day's prayer is, "If I could only see him once more!" She knows

he is far away, yet day after day she stands longing to see his boat shoot into sight from the bend which closes the end of the river. She tells herself she would be content to let him row by in silence, if she might only see his face. But evening after evening goes and he does not come, and Jeanne's heart is sorely troubled.

Her trouble is the greater because there is no one to bring her news of Edmond. She said once to her grandmother,

“Edmond has gone away, perhaps we shall never see him again.”

And the old woman answered,

“He only came for a certain time—we knew that he must go sooner or later.”

But Madame Delimoy was saddened too ; Edmond's handsome face, bright temper, and merry teasing had brought sunshine into her faded life. The girl was unwilling to speak of him to her grandmother ; she herself must soon go, she thinks, to Rima,

and she knows that his landlady will talk of Edmond. She shall hear from Madame Boulotte what he is doing. But everything has happened contrary to her expectations, and, when the new year comes, Jeanne has not been to Rimay.

One day in October, when she came in from taking Merette to water, she found Madame Delimoy immoveable in her chair, and unable to speak. Jeanne gave one look at the white fixed face, and then she hurried out to find Felix, the boy who cleaned the cow-stable and did the rough work; and sent him to Rimay for the doctor; Madame Delimoy recovered slowly, but she was more infirm than ever; and Jeanne dared not leave her for any long period, lest some accident might happen in her absence. More than once she had proposed to move to Rimay—where she knew that she could get a few pupils to add to their scanty income, and enable them to have a maid instead of Felix,

who was chiefly an outdoor servant; but Madame Delimoy looked so angry at the proposal that Jeanne had been obliged to avoid the subject for the future.

“My son’s child shall never work for her living,” the old woman said loftily, “he was an officer, and his wife was a lady; their child shall take no one’s money who is not of our blood.”

Jeanne sighed.

The life which had been so sweet and bright had grown dull and irksome, her sole comfort was when she could forget her surroundings in a book, and not only were books difficult to get, but the necessary work of the house took up nearly all the time she could spare from sewing and mending. The only change the poor girl got was on a Sunday, when she walked nearly two miles to the little church of the nearest village.

But it is bright clear weather again, and the cold is so severe that the river is

frozen over. Madame Delimoy is so well to-day that she seems almost herself. She is more cheerful than she has been since her illness.

“Jeanne, my child,” she says, “why should you not put on your skates and go to town, and buy the gown I promised you for Christmas ; you will be there and back, flying along as you do on the ice, in less time than it would take you to walk to Rimay by the road.”

Jeanne stands for a moment overwhelmed by the sudden unexpected proposal, then her eyes glisten, and she kisses the old woman with some of her old boisterous affection.

“You kind grandmother, how good you are ! and I can get you a new cap, and take some of the old ones to be got up by Madame Petit. You don’t look like yourself since she left off doing up the caps. My plaiting is a sad failure. Yes, yes, and I will bring a *galette* for your

supper, grandmother." She ran away joyfully to her room.

Jeanne is not long getting ready. She comes down stairs in a close-fitting, long cloth jacket, a fur cap on her head, and the skates hanging on her arm; her eyes are full of excitement, and she looks charming as she kisses her grandmother on both cheeks.

"I will soon be back, grandmother," she says; and then, with a careful glance at the fire, and a smiling nod at the old woman, she goes out into the keen air.

Madame Delimoy looks after her with a strange expression of relief.

"It was only the dulness that oppressed her," she says, "and I have been fancying she cared for Edmond. Bah! I need not have feared, she forgets all about him. See how set up she is by the chance of a change!"

Jeanne skims over the grass to the river-side. Edmond had taught her to skate, and



her cheeks glow, though her fingers are half-frozen as she fastens on her skates. The north wind is full of coming snow, and the sky is leaden overhead; but she does not heed the bitter cold as, like a bird, she flies over the glistening ice; the lines of her graceful, supple figure taking a hundred charming unconscious poses as she glides over the frozen river, so hushed and silent under its winter coating. She has passed the head of the stream now, and before her the little town of Rimay stands out almost like an island in the midst of the ice-blocked river; its white-roofed houses clustering round the church tower. Close to the town the ice is broken in places where the inhabitants dip for water, and Jeanne has to land a little before she reaches the promontory, which stretches out into the midst of the ice-covered stream.

But when she had taken off her skates she stood hesitating. "Grandmother said

I could buy my gown," she thought, "I should like a gown well enough, but I can do without it. I would much rather go and see Madame Boulotte, and I have not time to do both." She stood a minute longer, her dark eyes full of pensive sweetness, her cheeks flushed carmine with exercise; all at once the eyes sparkled brilliantly and the glow on her cheeks deepened.

"Yes, I will go and see Madame Boulotte," she said. "I have always gone to see her, why should I not go to-day?"

She walked quickly to the town, and soon reached the small house near the church, where Madame Boulotte lived and let lodgings. Madame Boulotte opened the door, and Jeanne found herself affectionately kissed and drawn into the little sitting-room before she had time to look at her grandmother's friend.

"This visit is delightful, my child." Madame Boulotte drew a deep sigh of satisfac-

tion, passed her plump hand over her light, frizzed curls to see if they were ruffled, and sank softly into her easy chair. She had been a very handsome woman, and her face was still remarkable ; and though she talked of herself as old, she loved compliments, and considered that she had still power to inspire a *grande passion*.

“How well you look, my dear child!” She gave Jeanne a scrutinising glance, and then a patronising nod of approval. “And how is the grandmother?”

“She is much better, thank you. And you, Madame, you look very well.”

“Ah, me ; I am as you see me—well enough, but I want employment ; my rooms are empty, and I have only myself to think of. . I whose life has been till now given up to others. Ah, *mon Dieu !*” she sighs again, and settles her shapely feet on an earthenware *chaufferette*, whose tint of faded green would have made an artist covet it. “My poor Edmond,” she says presently,

“I cannot bear to think what his life must be now. Poor fellow, how he must miss my—my friendship!”

“Do you hear from him,” says Jeanne, simply, but her heart beats fast.

A little pink flush of vexation rises on Madame Boulotte’s well-preserved skin. She is disappointed in Edmond Dupuis, she had thought her sympathy necessary to her handsome young lodger, and he has only written to her once since he left Rimay. She knows that he sometimes went to Madame Delimoy’s cottage, but she had never dreamed of the frequency of his visits there; it is she, she thinks, who is his friend.

“Yes, I have heard of him,” she says, and her handsome head becomes yet more erect. “I have received a letter from him since he left me—yes—yes, I have a letter; but, Jeanne, my heart is sore for the poor young fellow—”

She looks at Jeanne and she stops sud-

denly. The girl's bright eyes are fixed on her with intense eagerness, and her lips are parted with expectation.

"I must tell some one what I have heard of this poor young man," says the widow to herself; "as well this child as another, though she is too young to understand sentiment. Yes, my dear child," she goes on, aloud, "he had better have stopped at Rimay—here he lived in an atmosphere of sympathy, and was understood. Ah, Jeanne, so few women are gifted with perception, and no woman can make a man happy unless she has this gift. Yes, Edmond was truly happy here; he was understood, and what does the foolish young fellow do?" she shrugs her broad shoulders, and presses her plump hands together; "he goes to Namur, where his only friend is a fossil!"

Jeanne breaks into a merry laugh in spite of her interest, for Madame Boulotte's face is full of comic disgust.

“ Yes, it is true, my dear little friend, I am not joking—this cousin of Edmond’s—this Monsieur Baconfoy, must be a fossil—he is actually a woman-hater, he despises our sex. Edmond has told me sayings of his cousin Jules which would terrify you. Yes, he is an undoubted fossil. Well then, where was I?—with our poor Edmond—what does he do? He leaves his happiness here, my little friend.” Jeanne is taller than Madame Boulotte, who sits looking up at her with appealing eyes. “ Yes, he leaves me and goes to Namur, to solitude and the fossil. What is the result? Now, my dear child, can you guess what is going to happen?—”

Self-absorbed as she is, Madame Boulotte feels checked in her rapid utterance by the change in Jeanne. The bright rich colour that has so set off her shining hair, and the glow of her deep liquid eyes, fades to a sudden pallor; the eyes themselves seem to

lose light and colour, and to fix in an unmeaning stare.

“What ails you, child? how pale you are! Ah, it is the cold that has taken you. Marie, Marie,” she cries, and hurrying across the room, puts her head out of the door, “bring a *chaufferette* quick for Mam’selle Jeanne—you should have mine, dear little friend,” she pats Jeanne’s shoulder as she passes back to the chair; “but the blood flies to my head if I try to do without it—and a red nose in a woman, you will agree, is of all things to be avoided.”

Here Marie bustles in with the *chaufferette* and though Jeanne declares that the exercise has made her feel as warm as a toast, she has to submit to being coddled. Frizzled-haired Marie looks round to see that nothing more is wanted of her, and departs. Then Madame Boulotte heaves a deep sigh.

“We were talking about Monsieur

Dupuis. Now, my dear little friend," she says, "I do not say it has positively happened; but"—sinking her voice, "it is possible that Edmond is being drawn into a serious flirtation."

Jeanne is not taken by surprise. She has felt that there was a cause for Edmond's silence; her wish to see Madame Boulotte had been to hear her fears confirmed, with the mixture of longing and dread with which one meets pain half-way when one knows it to be inevitable; who is she, Jeanne asks herself, that such a man as Edmond Dupuis should keep heart-free for her sake?

"Who is flirting with him?" Jeanne forces her voice to keep steady; but it sounds dull and strained.

"Ah, child, that is well said; that is the right way of putting it, for truly if Edmond Dupuis flirts it is but to escape from the isolation into which he has been thrown; he is, one may say, at the mercy of any



woman who chooses to take possession of him. Bah !” she shrugs her shoulders, “you are too young to understand ; but a report has reached me that Monsieur Dupuis and a certain Madame Ferage see one another often. Madame Ferage is rich—the young widow of an old banker—not ugly, amiable—and benevolent.”

“If she has all these good qualities,” Jeanne is bravely struggling against a desperate dislike which had sprung up full-grown at the mention of Madame Ferage, “why should not Monsieur Dupuis marry her ? If she is amiable, she will make a good wife.”

Madame Boulotte shakes her head, and her hands too, with nervous irritation.

“I told you, you were too young, Jeanne, to understand,” she says, repressively. “*Mon Dieu !* are there not many amiable fools, child ?—the world is full of them, and no one can make a husband’s heart ache as a fool can. A fool is always right, and

when she makes mistakes that cannot be disavowed, she has a smiling, pretty way of pleading folly as an excuse for all errors. ‘She is not clever or strong-minded, thank heaven,’ she says, ‘she is only a silly, loving woman;’ and her husband, poor fellow, goes his way appeased, and thinks what an escape he has had from a *maîtresse femme*, who would surely have been a tyrant. Poor fellow ! poor blind idiot ! I should have said.” Madame Boulotte’s grey eyes light up with indignation. “Perhaps till death releases him he will hardly know that a silly woman is the worst of all despots.” She pauses for breath, rather surprised at her own unusual vehemence.

Jeanne has recovered herself now ; she smiles at her friend’s outbreak. “Well, then,” she says, “if the man knows no better he will be happy ; but, Madame, how did you hear this about Monsieur Dupuis ?”

Madame Boulotte gives Jeanne a peculiar look. “Ah, my dear little friend, I had

been talking and thinking of you before you came in to-day. My brother, Antoine, has come back from Antwerp. He is doing well there now; he is a photographer. You will soon see him, Jeanne; his first question was for you,”

She smiles; but the girl looks grave.

“Did Monsieur Antoine bring you this news from Namur?” she asks.

“Yes; he saw yesterday the fossil cousin, Monsieur Jules Baconfoy, and he asked after Edmond. ‘Ah, he was very dull at first,’ said Monsieur Baconfoy; ‘he had, I fancy, left his heart behind him, poor young fool,’ and Antoine said the odious man laughed loud enough to be heard across the street; ‘but he is mending fast,’ he went on—‘there is a certain Madame Ferage who is doing her best to console him, and, *ma foi*, the young fool is singeing his wings this time to more purpose.’”

Madame Boulotte stops; her cheeks

red with anger, and her eyebrows closely knit together.

“Is that all?” says Jeanne quietly.

“And enough too, I think ; but Antoine knew Madame Ferage some years ago when he was at Liége, and he told me about her. I do not say she will marry Edmond, but she will flirt with him, and I dare say make him miserable.”

“I will say good-bye now, Madame,” says Jeanne, in a dull spiritless voice, and she bends down her face to be kissed.

“Do not be so long again, child, without coming to see me, and I shall tell Antoine that Madame Delimoy will be glad to see him at the cottage. *Au revoir*, my dear little friend.”

## CHAPTER III.

## “THE FOSSIL.”

THE Hôtel de la Grue is in one of the main streets of Namur, but only a certain number of rooms look into the street. You enter through a pair of open gates under a broad archway, and find yourself in a good-sized courtyard, with a glazed roof, shut out from the stables at its further end by a second pair of large gates. On the right of the courtyard are a few steps, and going up these you find yourself in a pleasant *al fresco* sitting-room paved with black and white marble, also ceiled with glass, from which hang terra cotta baskets, even in this wintry season, gay and graceful with the

green of creeping plants. A sofa, some chairs and several small iron tables show that this is a favourite lounging-place of the visitors to the Hôtel de la Grue.

To-day, though the sun is shining warmly down through the glass overhead, there is no one in this lounging-place but the landlord, Monsieur Baconfoy. He is enjoying his after-dinner cup of coffee, he leans back on the sofa, and smoking a cigar, is studying the *Indépendance Belge*. Footsteps coming up the yard from the street disturb him. He rises slowly to his full height of six feet, takes his cigar from his mouth, and throws down the paper. Then you see that he is a fine, martial-looking man with a massive, square, head and close-cut grey hair. He wears no whiskers, but his shaggy eyebrows seem trying to match his moustache. A bright sweet smile spreads over his stern face as he sees his visitor; and yet through the sweet smile there is an almost

pathetic sadness in his handsome dark eyes.

“Aha, my friend, you are welcome, always welcome; if it be,” he adds, with what seems when accompanied by so genial a smile a forced cynicism, “if it be only because your ideas often make me laugh, *ma foi*.” He begins to laugh gruffly in anticipation. “You are delicious for freshness, my Edmond.”

The tall slender young fellow laughs back at him. “Then you ought to be very grateful to me,” he says. “What did you do for amusement before I came to Namur?”

Monsieur Baconfoy shook his head. “My good Edmond, the world is full of amusement for those whose sight is keen enough, and their digestion good enough to permit them to study others—for as you must have observed a dyspeptic man only studies himself and his stomach, and lives in daily terror of what he eats

and drinks. Well, how is our sweet widow, my Edmond?" And again he burst into a hearty laugh as he looked admiringly at his handsome young cousin.

Edmond drew his fine brown eyebrows together, and his eyes sparkled with annoyance.

"When will you learn to believe me, Jules?" he said, in a vexed voice. "I tell you that my acquaintance with Madame Ferage is of the most formal kind. I met her at a friend's house, and I have called on her a few times—that is all. Let us talk of something more interesting." He turned away and began to light a fresh cigar.

Monsieur Baconfoy sat down on the sofa again, and whistled softly to himself. "I am not finding fault, Edmond," he said, more seriously. "Frankly I am glad to see the change in you of late. I congratulate you. When you first came here from Rimay, I confess I found you a very dull



companion. You had lost your spirits; you had, in fact, as it seemed to me, left the best part of you at Rimay.”

The young man flushed deeply, and his face looked full of pain. “Well,” he said, with a forced laugh, “and pray what change do you find in me now? What cause have I given for congratulation?”

“Aha, my friend, you are improving, as I told Vidonze yesterday, if you must make a fool of yourself with a woman, this little widow seems a very hopeful case.”

Edmond had stood with his hand on one of the chair backs in his usual bending attitude, but now he turned angrily on his cousin.

“Jules! you spoke about me and Madame Ferage to that fellow Vidonze. I detest him, though he is Madame Boulotte’s brother. I wish you would be careful. You have done something you cannot undo again.”

He turned moodily away ; but Monsieur Baconfoy put his broad hand on his cousin's shoulder.

"My poor lad, when will you learn moderation? Your mind is too active, Edmond. I am not the only person in Namur with eyes in my head; for aught I know Vidonze himself has already remarked your attentions to Madame Ferage. Take a cigar, my Edmond, smoke yourself into serenity, I must go back to my work. Ah! *mon cher*, if you could know the independence of living in an atmosphere where women are of no more account than fleas would be to a rhinoceros. They are really no more necessary than measles or whooping cough; however," he had reached the door leading to his bureau, and there was a very cynical smile on his face, "I fancy yours is a temperament for which there is only one cure, bad as it is. You had better marry, my Edmond," and he went into his bureau.

The young man affected not to hear him. He sat down and began to read the newspaper, but very soon he dashed it down on the iron table.

“This is intolerable,” he said. “Jules is the last man I should have thought of as a gossip; but I suppose ridicule is an amusement he cannot deny himself. Vidonze will take all this tattle to his sister. Well, she does not often see Jeanne,” he leaned back, watching the pale blue smoke-wreaths as they floated upwards from his cigar; “but I will run no risk,” he said. “I will go to the cottage once more, and see if she holds by her resolution.”

Again he sat thinking; words spoken by Madame Boulotte came back to him from disjointed conversations, in which they had slipped by unheeded because other subjects had quickly effaced them. Yes, yes, he remembered very well that his landlady had said her brother admired

little Jeanne, and that he had laughed at the patronising way in which she had added, she should not object to Jeanne as a sister. Was it just possible that Jeanne's coldness was not coldness after all, but simply indifference to him because she preferred that fellow Vidonze? and if he sought her now, might he not possibly find Vidonze beside her—her accepted lover? Edmond's imagination set to work at once—even if matters had not so far progressed, for he remembered that Vidonze had shown some jealousy once when he found him at the cottage, there could be no doubt but that Madame Boulotte would take care that Jeanne knew the gossip he had heard at Namur.

“I remember she called him a chatterer.” He had blamed himself before for being hasty, and if he went to the cottage now the very sight of Jeanne would take away all his self-control. He had often said to himself that if he had been patient he

should have won her to confess her love. No, he did not believe she cared for Vidonze. He went on thinking; he would write to Jeanne, he thought; he would ask her very lovingly and gently to give him another hearing. He would even promise to wait any time she pleased. Her grandmother was very old, and he thought that if she out-lived his patience, he should prevail on Jeanne to yield to his persuasion in the future.

“It will be easy to find some one to take care of the old woman,” he said to himself.

## CHAPTER VI.

## A LETTER.

OLD Madame Delimoy sat spinning. She looked upright and well, only her immoveable figure and the slow movement of her fingers told how very old she was.

There was a cheerful wood-fire on the open hearth, and this lit up the low-roofed square room with its blaze, showing the short curtain hanging from the mantel-shelf, and the dresser full of crockery opposite; a huge brass warming-pan made a capital reflector, and sent a ruddy light across the back of the room, which was welcome—for on this winter afternoon, in the closed in valley beside

the river, there was less light down here than half way up the hills from whence one saw that the sun was still above the horizon.

But it seemed to strike the spinner all at once that the light was fading, she stopped her wheel, and grasping the arms of her wooden chair she rose to her feet. Her straight, rigid face was not so pale as when Edmond went away, the flush on it to-night was unusual, and her deep sunk eyes, usually so still, moved restlessly as she walked slowly across the room to the window.

As she walked she was no longer erect, her head sank on her chest and her shoulders seemed to droop forward. But when she reached the window she propped herself against the wall and drew up her head with a sigh of relief. Then slowly she thrust her age-marked, trembling fingers under the shawl crossed over her bosom, and drew out a letter.

There came on her face the peculiar smile that seems special to the old, in which sagacity is at times blent with cunning.

“Jeanne has been in and out, to and fro, all day ever since the postman brought it; she wanted to see my face when I read it. No, no,” and Madame Delimoy slowly shrugged her shoulders.

The postman had that morning brought a letter to the cottage, and Jeanne, who was standing at the door, took it to her grandmother. The girl did not know Edmond’s writing well; but she saw the postmark was Namur, and a secret instinct told her it was from him, and Madame Delimoy had seen a flush flicker over the clear colourless face, as Jeanne held out this letter to her.

The old woman took it, looked at it slowly and curiously, and then laid it down beside her.

Though she was a cold and worldly old



woman she had always been kind to Jeanne. Her very selfishness had kept her from the interference which a warmer interest in the girl would have produced. Jeanne had frankly told her everything except Edmond's confession of love, but, judging her grandmother's nature by her own, Jeanne had shrunk from confessing the sacrifice she had made.

There was no subterfuge about Jeanne, her simple direct nature always went straight to its object. When she saw the letter she thought the time had come for explanation.

"Why do you not read it, grandmother," she said, after a while.

Slowly the cold blue eyes fixed on the girl's eager face so full of palpitating hope, but Madame Delimoy's smile brought the blood swiftly to Jeanne's cheeks.

"Whom do you think it is from?" she said, coldly. It was hard to answer under that scrutinizing gaze, but Jeanne

must be true. "I think it is from Edmond Dupuis, grandmother."

"And if it is from him he has taken so long to write to an old friend that I am not in a hurry to open his letter; when I have mended my stockings I shall read it, not sooner—"

Her grandmother stopped, Jeanne had turned away, for she felt her blushes grow an angry red, but she had stood lingering. Madame Delimoy's smile deepened the creases near her mouth till they looked rigid.

"You are curious, child. I never saw you curious before, Jeanne; what ails you?"

The girl's heart swelled, she longed to throw her arms round the old woman's neck and own her love, she hungered so for help and sympathy; but she could not bring herself to do this. Her grandmother's want of sympathy, her slow sarcastic speeches, had strengthened the girl's nature, and had taught her self-dependence, but they had fostered an intense reserve, and Jeanne shrank from speaking or think-

ing about herself; now she recoiled from the idea of her grandmother's calm cynical smile as if it had a terror in it. She had repressed her emotion, and had gone away, and, though she had kept passing in and out, she had not again spoken of the letter.

Madame Delimoy slowly took off her spectacles and wiped them as she leaned against the window. Reading of any kind to her was an unusual employment—and reading a strange handwriting was likely to be troublesome; yet she must read this letter herself. She began to put on her glasses,—then she stopped, her knotted fingers trembled as she heard a man's voice, an unusual sound, singing outside the cottage, but the words of the song did not reach her ears. They had already received one of Death's first calls; still she heard something, and presently a loud knock at the door from a sturdy fist, startled her deaf ears.

“Who's there?” she pressed the letter

closely to her, and her voice quavered shrilly.

“Only me, only Antoine—Antoine Vidonze,” the loud, clear voice went on, “dont you know me, my good friend? Let me in. I have come all the way from Namur to see you.”

Involuntarily the old woman's eyes fell on the letter, for she had already seen that the postmark was Namur. It seemed to her that there was a fortuitous link between her visitor and Edmond Dupuis' letter—she undrew the bolts and opened the door.

“Good day, Monsienr Vidonze,” she said gravely, “we keep the door fastened now. Jeanne comes in through the cow stable in winter,” and she looked at a small door beside the fireplace. “Come in and sit down.”

Still holding her letter she walked with difficulty to her arm-chair, and seated herself, suppressing a groan as her joints creaked with the effort.

Antoine Vidonze ran one hand through his stiff red hair, and gave a careless look around the room out of his large, prominent eyes. He was a fine tall man enough, but he wore a forest of hair, his brick-dust coloured face looked too eager, and his light-coloured eyes, with pale lashes, seemed to devour everything around him.

“I hope Mademoiselle Jeanne is well,” he said, seating himself. “My sister told me she looked blooming when she came over to Rimay.” He fixed a keen glance on the old, still face opposite.

“Jeanne is well. She is on the hill. You say you come from Namur. Are you then *settled* at Namur, Monsieur Antoine?”

Monsieur Vidonze smiled till he showed a set of white strong teeth, and very red gums above them.

“Aha, Madame, you are just the same as ever, I see, you have not given up your iokes at my expense ; *ma foi*, I shall never

forget how on one occasion you told me you would as soon bestow your grand-daughter on a travelling tinker as upon me. Yes, I have a house of my own at Namur."

The statue-like head turned ever so little towards Monsieur Vidonze; its pale blue eyes met his with genuine surprise in them. Jeanne had not told her grandmother Madame Boulotte's news about her brother, and this was a most unheard of tone for the "vagabond, unsettled Antoine Vidonze" to take in speaking to his old friend.

"Yes, yes, my good friend, my roving days are over," he said, in answer to her looks, "I can own my faults now—the fact is I have at last found an employment that suits me. My uncle who died in the summer, left me enough to pay my debts and something over, and with this I have purchased the business, stock and house, of Monsieur Grandjean, the photographer of Namur.

Aha, Madame, let me tell you, it is an excellent affair for me."

The old woman looked at him calmly, and then that cold smile which so repressed and troubled Jeanne, spread over her face.

"What do you know about photography?" she said, with a sneer. "I remember you made a caricature of Jeanne, when you tried to take her portrait."

Antoine turned a little aside, and fumbled in one of the pockets of his fawn-coloured coat. He drew out of it a packet of photographs, and, opening this, he held out one to Madame Delimoy.

"That is what I can do, Madame."

She fixed her spectacles firmly, and then held the photograph in her shaking fingers; as she gazed colour came into the pale blue eyes, and they blinked as she gave back the picture.

"Yes, it is the place itself," she said,

“it is Dinant. I have not seen it since I was married in the church there; I see it looks just the same. Did you know that I was from Dinant?” she asked, abruptly.

Vidonze hesitated a moment.

“Yes,” he said, “that is why I showed you that view. I knew you would appreciate it; I have always photographed more or less, Madame, but I could not before afford a good apparatus, so no one would look at my efforts—*ma foi*, now I am the fashion. I have already so much to do in the way of taking portraits, that I have little time for views; and portraits are certain money, people like them.”

“Imbeciles,” she muttered. “They could see themselves in their glass, but they cannot see a picture like that every day.” Then, with a brisk change of voice, “Why do you tell me all this, Monsieur?”

He looked at her fixedly. There was a slight sneer on his face, for he compre-



hended that Antoine Vidonze, sometime a banker's clerk, sometime a teacher in a school, sometime a supernumerary in an official bureau, a mere rolling stone, was a very different person from Monsieur Vidonze, proprietor of a good house, and of the best photographic studio in Namur; especially different in the eyes of his listener; for the hard usage which the world generally bestows on those who do not possess its goods, had sharpened Antoine's perception, and he had long ago found out that a man in Madame Delimoy's estimation was weighed by his means, rather than by his merit.

"I fancy you can guess why, Madame," he answered gravely. "I can keep a wife now, and I can offer you a home, Madame; and in short, if you will give me Jeanne, I shall be ever grateful."

His face had softened as he went on,

and he bent forward eagerly towards the pale old woman.

She was smiling, but not genially, and she patted with her forefinger the letter she still held in her hand.

“Suppose you come too late, Monsieur Vidonze.”

He started slightly, and his eyes sparkled angrily. “What do you mean, Madame, and who is that letter from ?”

He held out his hand with involuntary movement; and Madame Delimoy crumpled up the letter under her shawl.

“You are hasty, Monsieur Vidonze; you need not shout so loud. The letter is from my young friend, Monsieur Edmond Dupuis.”

“Dupuis ! Bah ! he can have nothing to say to Mademoiselle Jeanne, he is courting some one else.”

A tremor passed over the old woman, then she laughed drily. “Of that I know

nothing, but I know he cannot marry, he has not enough to keep a wife."

Antoine Vidonze nodded.

"You are right. Dupuis has only what he earns, and not much of that, and he spends it; he is the most careless fellow I know about money, a spendthrift—generous enough," he added this with some compunction at the remembrance of sundry loans he had been glad to ask for while Edmond lodged with Madame Boulotte.

"Fools and their money are soon parted," the old woman said. "I ask you how can he marry?"

"It is easy enough, when the woman he is courting is rich; she is Madame Ferage, the widow of the old banker of Liège, who died two years ago."

The old woman's eyes moved restlessly, and her head shook with excitement. "Are you sure of what you say, Monsieur Antoine?"

Vidonze shrugged his shoulders. "I had the news from his cousin, Monsieur Baconfoy, of the Hôtel la Grue; he says Dupuis spends half his time with the young widow."

Madame Delimoy put a hand on each arm of her chair and drew herself up stiffly.

"If this is true, why, then, should he write to me?"

At this Antoine's eyes burned with curiosity.

"Did Dupuis ask you to give him Mam'selle Jeanne before he left Rimay Madame?"

She did not turn her head, but a suspicious glance showed in her sunken eyes as they looked towards the cow-house; she raised a finger warningly.

He went to the door and looked, then he came closer to her. "I am answered," he said in a lower voice. Antoine remembered what she had told him about

Jeanne. He glanced at the letter which Madame Delimoy had again brought from under her shawl, and he saw that the seal was unbroken.

“Had you not better see what he says, Madame ? but I tell you he is sure to marry Madame Ferage, she is rich : he would be a fool to give up such a chance. *Ma foi*, he need never do a stroke of work again.”

“Perhaps he writes to tell me so.”

“It is possible ; but why do you not make sure ?” His eyes devoured the letter in her trembling hand. “Shall I read it for you,” he cried impatiently, and he held out his hand.

The calm smile he so well remembered spread over her face, just the smile with which two years ago she had told him she would as soon give her grandchild to a travelling tinker as to him.

“Thank you,” she bent her head stiffly ; “I do not hear so well as I did, but my eyesight is still good.”

She raised the letter nearer to her eyes, and broke the seal.

Antoine Vidonze fixed his glaring eyes on her face while she read ; but the face, bent now slightly over the letter, was sphynx-like in its stillness—presently she refolded the letter, and peered inside the envelope. “There is also a note for Jeanne,” she said.

Vidonze could not restrain himself. He got up and stood beside Madame Delimoy.

“Does he tell you about Madame Ferage ?” he said, in a fierce, eager voice.

He spoke close to her ear, and the old woman started ; a red flush mounted to her forehead, and she looked angrily at Antoine.

“Why need you speak so loud, Monsieur ? He says nothing about her.”

But Vidonze felt that he had no time to spare. Jeanne might come in at any moment, and perhaps her grandmother would give her Dupuis’ letter.

“He asks you to give him Mam’selle Jeanne? tell me,” he said, sternly. As he bent over her, his eyes glowering from under his thick, red brows, the old woman felt all at once the strength of his will, and she began to tremble.

“Why are you angry?” she said in a shrill, shaky tone; “have I not always been good to you?”

“Yes, Madame, very good, most kind;” he sneered. “Why do you not answer my question? What does he say?”

“He says he loves the child as much as ever,” she spoke feebly, “and that he wants her for his wife.”

Vidonze laughed.

“His wife—good—I like his impudence; and on what does he propose to keep house for you and Jeanne, Madame?”

The colour faded out of the old woman’s face, and a sudden look of suspicion filled it. She opened the letter, and read it through again.

“ Well, Madame, what does he say ?”

“ He speaks only of Jeanne,” she said.

“ Open the other letter,” said Vidonze, keeping his eyes firmly on her face ; “ you have a right to see what he writes to Mam’selle Jeanne ; open it, Madame.”

Mechanically she pulls out the other letter. She can hardly hold it, her fingers so quiver with agitation. Vidonze bends down, gnawing his under-lip with anxiety. But Madame Delimoy does not open the letter. She hesitates and looks up at Vidonze.

“ Jeanne will be here directly, and she will show me what he has written. She is a good child, as open as light itself ; she keeps nothing from me.” She glances towards the door of the cow-house, and sits with her head bent forward, listening.

Vidonze feels as if he must snatch the letter from her hands.

“ See what you are doing by your delay,” he says impetuously ; “ you should rather



keep the poor girl from all knowledge of this fellow's proposal. I tell you, Madame, he is courting another woman, and Jeanne knows it ; my sister told her about it when she last came to Rimay."

Slowly a flash of intelligence reveals itself in those pale, sunken eyes. Madame Delimoy remembers how quiet the girl was when she came back from her visit to Madame Boulotte, and how quiet she has been ever since.

"What does it all mean?" she wonders ; "and yet Edmond asks me to give him Jeanne. Tell me again what Monsieur Baconfoy said," she says to Antoine ; "perhaps you mistook his meaning."

He gives himself an angry shake, and curses her mentally ; then he says, in an injured voice : "There is no mistake, Madame ; Edmond Dupuis spends a part of every day with the widow Ferage. I tell you she is young and rich and pretty, and he will no doubt end by marrying her

'The only way in which I can interpret the proposal to you in that letter,' he looked determinedly at her, "is that he has already asked you for Mam'selle Jeanne, and has got from you an indefinite answer; he now gives you the chance of refusing him decidedly, for he must know that you will have heard of this new affair; everyone knows it at Namur."

"If that is so," she says, "it is an insult to me, and to Jeanne also." She begins to open Jeanne's letter. "I will see what he proposes to the child."

The old woman's face flushes, she trembles with anger; as she reads her caution forsakes her. "I am 'a poor old woman, who is to be tenderly cared for,' is that so? 'A servant of my cousin's, who is old too, and who wants a home, will be just the person to take your place beside your grandmother;' and he dares to write this to my child, and to say he loves her, and he is paying open court to another

woman. The villain !” she pauses for breath, flattening the letter under her trembling hands, “ he says he can only offer the child a small lodging, for some years ; he expects to be poor. What can he mean. My Jeanne does not want to marry unless she gets a good house and a provision for her old days ; for what else should a girl marry ?” She sits trembling, the flush fades, she is paler than ever, from this most unwonted outburst. The strength which her excitement has brought is slipping away, and she feels feebler than before.

Vidonze watches her keenly, and he sees how exhausted she is—she is in his power now. “ I could not have thought Edmond Dupuis would have done this,” he says ; “ even if he wished to marry Mademoiselle Jeanne, he should not have tried to separate her from you ; his letter is an insult to you, and to you both ; how could you part from your child, Madame ? After what I have heard at

Namur you will do well to put both these letters in the fire."

"Jeanne would never leave me, she has promised," and the feeble fingers close on the crisp paper.

Vidonze smiles.

"But do you not see I speak for Jeanne's sake? doubtless she would not leave you; I would never ask her to do it. Why disturb her innocent mind by that letter?"

She fixes her eyes once more searchingly on Vidonze's face. "You are sure, Antoine Vidonze, you have told the truth?" she says slowly.

"Yes, Madame, the plain truth."

She crumples up both letters and flings them away into the burning logs.

Vidonze sets the heel of his boot on the flaming papers, so that no fitful gust from the chimney may rob the greedy fire of its prey. "You have done well and bravely, Madame," he says.

While he still stands thus, he hears Jeanne's clear voice speaking to the cow, and he sees the latch of the door rise.

"You will give her to me, it is a promise," he says close to her ear.

"Yes, I promise," says the feeble voice, and Jeanne runs into the cottage.

## CHAPTER VII.

## A YOUNG WIDOW.

ON the ground floor of a small house in one of the quiet streets of Namur there is a window noticed by all the passers-by; on one side of it is the little mirror, fixed so as to reflect the passers in the street long before they come in sight of anyone within the nest of leaves and flowers that make the window so attractive; the little balcony outside is gay with crocuses and early tulips, and on a table just within is a charming background of ferns, while overhead a hanging basket flings down clinging tendrils, that seem to caress the head of

Madame Ferage as she sits gazing at the reflector, yet keeping herself out of sight.

There is a contradiction in the pretty gazing face; a pensive sweetness in the dark eyes, and yet a fluttered impatience that contrasts well with the rest of her bright, dark face, and with the glowing skin, through which the blood seems to course warmly, and yet is at war with the pensive sweetness which gives to Madame Ferage the habitual air of a dark-eyed Madonna. She is a tiny creature; but she is well-formed, and sitting now beside this window is unconscious of the simple grace of her attitude. She soon alters it, she is too feverish and restless to keep still, and as the light falls more fully on her face it is easy to see that she has been crying.

“I cannot give up hope,” she says to herself; “there must be some good cause for his absence. He is so very kind; he has always been anxious to put happiness into

my life ; he would not leave off coming for mere caprice."

This poor gentle little woman had hitherto known little happiness. She had been brought up in a dull old house at Malines, not unkindly, but coldly, by a book-absorbed father, and a stepmother who thought dumb beasts were preferable to her fellow-creatures. Little Pauline seldom saw her father, and was always warned against disturbing him at his studies. She was not sent to school, where she might have made herself friends, and have been developed by contact with other children ; instead she had a tall, stylish-looking, self-absorbed governess, at war with the world and wholly unsympathetic, and for companions a parrot, four cats, and two superannuated pug dogs. Her stepmother was not unkind, but she was an invalid ; moreover, she detested children. She kissed Pauline night and morning, she taught her to say



her prayers, gave her a good nurse, and, when she was old enough, a very clever governess; and she thanked heaven daily for having made her so good a mother.

Mademoiselle Elise Herkenne was very clever; there was nothing she could not do in the way of brain-work. She was accomplished, and when she was in a good temper would enchant little Pauline by her singing and her playing; but she sang and played to please herself, the idea of living for anyone but herself, or of giving this poor little lonely child anything besides the education she was paid to give, would have been something beyond the comprehension of even Mademoiselle Elise's keen wits. She had one ruling idea, and in this she was always absorbed: how could she advance herself in life? how quit the detestable employment by which she earned a living? Woe to little Pauline if she disturbed Mademoiselle Herkenne's reveries; and the child, timid by nature, shrank into

herself and learned to play softly with the cats and the cross old dogs at the far off end of the school-room. She was not clever or quick at learning, and as she grew older the preparation of her studies took all her time, except that given to tasks of needlework.

For reasons best known to herself, Pauline's stepmother never asked Mademoiselle Herkenne to join the family circle. She and Pauline took their solitary meals together in the dull, bare room where they studied. On Sunday the governess could go and see her friends, and Pauline was allowed to look at picture-books in the *salon* ; but if visitors came she was usually sent away.

Her seventeenth birthday happened to fall on a Sunday, and, to her surprise, when two gentlemen came in her stepmother did not send her away, but presently called her and presented her to them. Pauline thought them dull ; at first she had

felt, spite of her shyness, excited at the idea of speaking to strangers ; but one of these gentlemen was short and fat, and insignificant-looking, and the other, though he smiled and seemed pleasant, had so red a face that she did not find him attractive to look at. When Mademoiselle Herkenne appeared next morning, she began to question Pauline about her birthday ; and the girl was puzzled by the inquisitiveness her governess showed respecting the visitors.

A few days after, when she was in despair over a very difficult German exercise, a summons came for her from her stepmother.

This was such an unheard of proceeding that Pauline felt frightened. She began to anticipate a scolding, for she knew that Mademoiselle Herkenne was never satisfied with her *devoirs*.

But when she reached the dining-room her father sat at one end of the breakfast-

table and her stepmother at the other, and they both smiled at her as she came in. She went up and held her forehead dutifully to each for a kiss. Sometimes, very rarely however, when she had seen her father alone she had ventured to put her arms round his neck, and her caress had been warmly returned, but this was when she was younger; in his wife's presence he was always absent and dreamy, and Pauline dared not rouse him from what her stepmother had once told her were his studies.

“What have you been about, child?” Her stepmother seemed struck with the girl's scared face.

“My German exercise, mamma.”

“Do you like German, my child?” Her father looked up at her.

“Yes,” she said, smiling shyly; she felt less afraid of her father than of her stepmother; “but I like my music best of all.”

The stepmother smiled, though she was not sure that the utterance of a decided opinion was becoming in so young a girl.

“You will have abundant time for German and music too,” she said, “in future. Your school life is ended, Pauline. I have dismissed Mademoiselle Herkenne, and you are going to be married.”

Poor little Pauline, she had read no love stories, but in her child's heart there was a longing for freedom and for love. Marriage to her meant the dull shut-up life of her father and her stepmother, and she burst into sudden sobbing.

Her father grew red; he pulled off his spectacles, and looked reproachfully at his wife. The scheme seemed to be turning out less well than he expected, and he considered that his wife ought to bear all the blame of the failure. But though his wife was deficient both in feeling and intellect, her strength of will never failed, it came to help her now, but with it the

warning that a girl could not quite be made to take her husband as she took a pill—she perceived that the dose must be sugared.

“You must not be a baby, Pauline,” she said. “I have heard Mademoiselle Herkenne say that you love flowers, and that you are always wishing we lived in the country; when you are married you will live in the country. I thought I was offering you a treat. It is a pity you are always silly, child.”

She sighed deeply, and leaned back, putting her hand to her heart, while poor trembling Pauline felt herself a monster of ingratitude, and choked down her quivering sobs.

“Please tell me what you wish, mamma,” she said.

The stepmother shot a triumphant glance at her husband. She had till now been afraid he might interpose some weak relenting in favour of Pauline.

“That is wise.” She smiled in a superior fashion. “Your father proposes that you should marry Monsieur Ferage. This gentleman is very rich, and has a beautiful country-house near Liége. You will have more flowers than you ever saw in your life, a large garden, a wood, a lake, fruit of all kinds, a carriage and horses, plenty of dresses and servants, and a beautiful piano of your own.” At this last word Pauline’s eyes cleared from their terrified expression. She was only allowed to touch the piano in practice hours, and it was in the room where her stepmother always sat. Mademoiselle Herkenne usurped the pianoforte in the school-room. “Well,” her stepmother had waited some minutes for her answer, “have you nothing to say, Pauline?”

The girl’s hands had hung down beside her, now she pressed them nervously together as she strove for courage to speak.

“Must I go away alone with this Monsieur Ferage?” she said. “I don’t know him, mamma.” There was almost a cry in the sweet, trembling voice. The child felt so frightened.

Then her father spoke huskily. “You shall not go at all unless you wish it, my child; but it is a great chance for you. When we die there will be no one to take care of you, and we are not rich, Pauline; and Monsieur Ferage is very fond of you. He—he,” he stammered, with a certain self-consciousness of his own neglect of this helpless child, “will be kinder to you than we have been, Pauline. I mean you will be more cheerful.”

“Bah!” said his wife, with her usual alertness, “you are sentimental, Louis. You have seen Monsieur Ferage, child,” she went on; “he was the tallest of the two gentlemen you saw on Sunday. He asked you if you liked flowers, he is—”

She stopped, for Pauline’s face had



lengthened, and it was evident that she was going to cry again—great drops were balancing themselves on her eye-lashes.

“That was a very old gentleman, mamma.”

“Child, child—his hair has turned grey, that is all; he is not nearly so old as your father is; but he is ever so fond of you; he will spoil you, and give you flowers every day. Now go upstairs and tell Valerie to put you on your new frock, and then come to me for a ribbon for your hair. Make yourself look as nice as you can, Pauline, and who knows perhaps we may all take a trip to Brussels this afternoon.”

Pauline went upstairs; she was too much disturbed by her alarm and her excitement to be able to think even when she came downstairs decked to meet her fate.

Monsieur Ferage met them at the railway-station; his face was very red, but he was kind and devoted; and the little girl learned to her surprise that she was a person

of consequence. Monsieur Ferage came to see her every day. She was taken to Liège to see the country-house and the charming garden that were to be hers, and her heart swelled at the thought that this would all be her own. She still shrank from Monsieur Ferage's red face, but he was very kind, and he made her such beautiful presents that she began to feel friendly towards him. The poor child fancied she must be in a dream. Her time was so taken up by dressmakers and excursions that she had no time for reflection, and she had not even Mademoiselle Herkenne to take counsel with. The governess had been suddenly sent away. Pauline was truly in a dream, but the awakening came some weeks later when she found herself established in the château near Liège. She then discovered that she had married a husband who drank incessantly, who could scarcely bear her to be out of his sight, and who

became furiously jealous if she tried to make an acquaintance for herself. This terrible penance had lasted five years, and when it ended with her tyrant's sudden death, Pauline found herself shyer than ever, with an utter distrust of herself. She came to live at Namur, her father and her stepmother were dead, but she would not go back to Malines. The remembrance of her miserable childhood, and of her forced marriage haunted her. Her marriage life had been a time of torture, but she had gained knowledge in it. She had found books in her husband's château, and among them some plays and novels. In these she had discovered her own vague dreams of love set forth as realities, and although she was too timid to hope that anyone would ever think her worthy of true love, still she shrank from the atmosphere of repression recalled by the town in which her childish years had passed. If she even saw a photograph of the massive

towered church in the Grande Place of Malines, she would begin to tremble, and all self-possession deserted her.

She was so timid that she had made few acquaintances in Namur, but she was known to be wealthy, and very soon some of the ladies she met at the Bureau de Bienfaisance, a society of which she at once became a member, asked permission to visit her, and, when her period of mourning was over, they invited her to little evening receptions.

At one of these she met Edmond Dupuis, and became at once deeply interested in him. He scarcely looked at her, he seemed too sad to notice anyone, but when he was presented to the shy, little girlish creature, something in her sweet voice soothed and attracted him.

She was so simple, so utterly unconventional, that the poor fellow felt safe with her and stayed beside her all the evening.

Poor little Pauline! when she went home that night, it seemed as if she had been lifted to a mountain's-top, where the air blew fresh and free—never had such a gladness come into her life. Sometimes in the faces of others she had been startled by the sight of a joy beyond her comprehension, and had gone on her way pondering and puzzled. She knew what it meant now, she saw that stage books were not the romances she had considered them—there was real happiness in life besides the only happiness she had yet known, that of benefiting others, and then with the feeling of bright joy came its shadow—impatience. Patient, gentle Pauline, who had always yielded up her own will, and waited for her way to be shown her, found herself strangely stirred; it seemed to her as if she could not live through the hours till she saw Monsieur Dupuis again.

She was no longer quite so childish as when she married; the life she had led with

her husband, while it had cowed her spirit, had given her the knowledge that reading teaches, and though she had spent her two years of mourning in retirement at Namur, she had been thrown more in contact with the outside world than she had ever been before.

It was not therefore difficult, now that she had begun to visit some of these ladies, to make sure that she should again enjoy the happiness of seeing Monsieur Dupuis. She was so very quiet, so apparently unselfish, that when she asked her friends to spend an evening with her, and told the lady at whose house she had met Monsieur Dupuis, she would be glad if she would bring him with her young people—it was only considered a fresh proof of the benevolence of the sweet little widow, and the lady who had already destined Edmond for her own *passée* eldest daughter, thought what a charming house Madame Ferage's would

be for the young people to meet in. It never occurred to her that the timid little widow might prove a dangerous rival.

But Madame Ferage only gave this one *soirée*, which proved a success to her and her guests. It opened her doors to Edmond Dupuis, and that was all she wanted. He found her society very soothing. She was so amiable, she listened so patiently to his railings against the world and against the profession which he followed and disliked, to his theories of what life might be if each man did only that which he chose to do and got all he wanted ; by degrees Edmond gave up his other friends, more than once his heart seemed to open to a sudden perception of the widow's true sympathy, and he had nearly confessed to her the tale of his love and of his sorrow.

But since he had written to Madame Delimoy and to Jeanne, Edmond had not been to see Madame Ferage. At last he

had conquered his pride, he had poured out his love to Jeanne, though it humbled him deeply to confess that he could only ask her to share his bachelor lodging, instead of giving her a home of her own. Still he felt happier and full of new hope. after he had written. He no longer needed Madame Ferage's society—he was so full of excitement and impatience that he liked best to be alone. Three months of delay had cost him much suffering, and now he felt unable to bear suspense. He was sure that Jeanne would be his, he even forgave her first refusal, it had been an over-zeal, an overstrained sense of duty to her grandmother he thought, her care for Madame Delimoy had made her untrue to her own feelings. Love with its usual selfishness towards all women except the beloved one, made Edmond forget that the young widow would miss his almost daily visits ; though, as he had given up his other friends for her, he



might have reflected that his acquaintance with Madame Ferage must have attracted some notice in so small a town as Namur, and that therefore this sudden rupture would expose her to comment, but he almost forgot her existence.

So Pauline sat day after day at her window, her eyes fixed on the little mirror, hoping to catch even a glimpse of the friend who had deserted her.

“Would it have been better,” she asked sadly, “if I had never known such happiness as I have known with him ;” she shook her head, “the very sight of him makes me happy—life seems so much more dreary without him. No, life has only been real since we met—before I was always craving for something in which I did not believe.”

## CHAPTER VIII.

## JEANNE'S STRUGGLE.

“**F**RUIT that ripens late is always good,” is a proverb very often verified; but it is of larger application than the sense to which its final word points. Late development in other things than fruit produces power, but not always goodness.

Antoine Vidonze had ripened late, and the conviction that money is power had determined him to use strength of will, hitherto undeveloped, in turning all things to his own advantage.

When he saw Jeanne's pale, noble face come out of the darkness into the ruddy

glare of the firelight, he did not trouble to ask himself if he could make the young girl happy as his wife, or even if she loved Edmond Dupuis, as he once fancied she did. He resolved that Jeanne should marry him ; she was under age, and he had her grandmother's consent. She was his ; but as he seldom went direct to any object, he dissembled his feelings when he spoke to her.

Jeanne had started when she saw her grandmother was not alone. She knew that Madame Delimoy had quarrelled with Monsieur Vidonze, and that he had not been to the cottage for more than a year.

"Shake hands with Monsieur Antoine," her grandmother said ; "it is long since he has paid us a visit."

Jeanne gave her hand, wondering at this change in her grandmother ; but her head was too full of her own recent adventures to receive any new impression distinctly, it had all been so fresh and delightful ; and yet she did not want

to tell her grandmother what had been happening to her before Monsieur Vidonze. He stood staring at her, and she thought how red and coarse-looking he had become.

“You are late, child,” her grandmother said; “where have you been?”

She must tell now.

“It is Monsieur le Curé’s fault,” she smiled, “he said you would not mind. I went to see Rose, and coming home, all at once, just before you come in sight of the end of the road, I met Monsieur le Curé and a lady and gentleman. Monsieur le Curé beckoned me.”

“‘Come here, Jeanne,’ he said, ‘I want you. I was looking for some one to show this gentleman and lady their way; they have lost it; they want to go to Beville—can you guide them?’

“I said yes, I could; but I was afraid you would miss me; but Monsieur le Curé laughed, he said ‘It is all right, my child,’

and then he said to the gentleman and lady, 'I must go home to some sick people; but Jeanne Lahaye is a better guide than I am.' Was not that kind, grandmother?"

"Monsieur le Curé is always right," said Madame Delimoy.

"And you went to Beville with these strangers?" Vidonze looked suspicious, he felt that Jeanne belonged to him, and that she had no right to be going about in this way.

Jeanne opened her bright brown eyes. "You are such a stranger here, Monsieur Vidonze, that you have forgotten how far it is to Beville. No, I did not go so far; I took the gentleman and lady across the hills, and I showed them the road; we could not go fast, for the gentleman was ill and lame." Vidonze gave a sigh of relief. "But the lady is so pleasant—she asked if she might come and see you, grandmother, and I said Yes."

"They are English tourists, perhaps?"

Vidonze asked eagerly. He was thinking of his photographs.

Jeanne was puzzled by the interest he showed. She wished he would go; she wanted to talk about her new friends without the restraint of his presence. She was in such a flow of excited happy feelings she could scarcely keep it within bounds.

“They are not English; they come from Remouchamps. Oh, grandmother, they so much want to see you.”

Madame Delimoy roused. She had been puzzling what was the best thing to do with Jeanne, and now she resolved to send Vidonze away before he could give the girl a hint of his intentions. Just now she had yielded to the power his strong will exercised over her; but the sight of Jeanne, the sound of her clear, true voice, had weakened the spell. Madame Delimoy resolved that she would be free of Edmond Dupuis before she gave Jeanne to Antoine Vidonze.

“Monsieur,” she bent her head with stately politeness, “you must come again some day to show us your photographs, it is too dark to see them now.”

Antoine smiled, he was much too wise to resist her wishes now that he had destroyed his rival's hopes.

“Then I will say *au revoir* to you and Mam'selle Jeanne. Perhaps, at her next visit to Rimay, Mam'selle Jeanne will allow me to take her portrait.”

Jeanne clapped her hands with delight.

“Thank you,” she said, “that would be pleasant; but, Monsieur, if you could bring your machine here, and photograph grandmother and Merette, it would be delightful.”

Vidonze gave her a radiant smile. “It shall be so,” he said. “I will bring the machine early in the day, so as to have good light to work by, if I have the permission of Madame Delimoy.” He looked

entreatingly at the old woman, but her quiet smile re-assured him.

“Be satisfied, Monsieur,” she said, “if I sit to anyone for my portrait, it shall be to you.”

The door closed behind him, and then Jeanne knelt beside Madame Delimoy. Her fresh young face came close against the faded wrinkled one. The old woman thought it was long since she had seen her grandchild so full of buoyant happiness. The passionate love Edmond had expressed in his letter to Jeanne came back to her, and her breath was quicker than usual. There was a tender spot in her heart for the handsome young fellow. What a fine couple those two would make, she thought, as the flickering firelight showed now the clear pure skin, and now the bright eyes and sunny hair that nestled against her shawl.

“The lady is so kind, grandmother, and



she says she saw you once when you lived at Dinant with grandfather. She says grandfather was her doctor; her name is Mademoiselle de Matagne, and she calls her brother Eugène. She told me her own name was Claude."

The grandmother smiled in the cold cynical way that always repressed Jeanne.

"She seems to be young for her age this new acquaintance of yours, to have got so far as to telling her Christian name to a little girl who guides her over the hills."

Jeanne remained silent, her exuberant gladness was hushed; it was plain, she thought, that grandmother took no interest in her adventure. Presently Madame Delimoy spoke.

"I do not remember the name De Matagne; but your grandfather had many patients, and I did not know them all. Are these strangers staying for long at Beville?"

This was all Jeanne wanted; she slipped her arm round the old woman, gave her

a hearty squeeze, and then began again to chatter gaily.

“It was hearing your name, grandmother, that made her care about me. Oh, she has been so kind. She gathered the wild flowers, and told me their names, and said she would bring me some books when she came again. She said,” here Jeanne’s voice grew a little constrained and nervous, “she wished I could go to their château at Remouchamps, and then she would show me pictures and books, and teach me to sketch as Monsieur, her brother, does.”

“Was the brother as affectionate as the sister?” said Madame Delimoy’s cold voice. “They must be a strange pair, I think.”

Jeanne flushed; with all her love for Madame Delimoy she did not always think her right, and she thought her unjust now to judge people she had never seen.

“Monsieur de Matagne scarcely spoke;

he is much older than his sister, and he is an invalid."

"Are they rich people?" said Madame Delimoy.

Jeanne paused to consider. "She was not richly dressed. I do not know, grandmother."

"Where do they live, did you say?"

"She said they had a château at Remouchamps, and that, as I loved flowers, she knew I should like to see her garden. It is full of beautiful flowers, she says even now under glass she has lovely flowers of all kinds."

Madame Delimoy gave a nod of approval. "Yes, she must be rich, child."

"Then," Jeanne clasped her hands round the old woman's arm, and looked up at her with sparkling eyes, "you are glad she is coming to see you, grandmother?"

Madame Delimoy smiled. "I may remember her when I see her, but I have to

“speak to you about business, Jeanne.”

Jeanne was still clasping the withered arm, and as she felt it tremble within her fingers, her trouble of the morning came back. She felt she had been heartless to take so much pleasure in this new acquaintance.

“Yes,” she said, quietly. “What is it, grandmother?”

“That letter,” the voice was very shrill and quavery, “that came this morning was from Edmond Dupuis. Do you know what it was about, my child?”

There was more feeling in her words than Jeanne had ever heard there; she felt that grandmother did sympathise with her after all.

“I can guess.” Her pale cheeks glowed in the firelight.

“Yes,” the words came slowly as if she feared their effect; “he wrote to ask me for you, Jeanne. He wants to take you away from me.”

Jeanne loosened her clasp of her grandmother's arm ; she seated herself, and her hands fell into her lap.

"May I see the letter, grandmother?" She did not look up; she bent down over her clasped hands as if she were cold. She did not see the sudden flush that rose on the old woman's face, nor feel the tremor that shook her frame.

"I have not got it here," she said, "but I will tell you what was in it. Monsieur Dupuis wishes you to be his wife, Jeanne; he says his cousin has an old servant who will come and take care of me for the rest of my life. He does not want me at Namur; he wants you by yourself. You must tell me the answer I am to send him, child."

For a minute or two longer the girl sat crouching, then she raised her head and looked at Madame Delimoy.

"Grandmother, I cannot believe Edmond said that. He asked me to marry him, and I told him that I could not leave

you; and then you were stronger than you are now."

"You told this to Monsieur Dupuis, and you did not tell me that he had asked you to be his wife?"

Madame Delimoy's face was full of reproach.

But Jeanne's steadfast eyes met hers without any compunction in them.

"No, I did not tell you," she said earnestly. "I did not care to say I had given him up for your sake." She stopped; her heart was full of pain, once more Edmond's love was offered to her, and now she had learned to prize it dearly—she could not give it up again.

Madame Delimoy moved uneasily. She was touched, and natural feeling was drawing her to the conclusion that Jeanne loved young Dupuis; her silence betrayed her; but self—that one deadly insatiable sin of the Seven Sins of the House of Pride—would not let Madame Delimoy listen to

her feelings ; a dim dread lest they might grow too strong for her interposed, and she called up the remembrance of Vidonze. She would learn all about his means and his house before she ratified her promise ; but it would be easy enough to do this, his sister, Madame Boulotte, would not encourage him to take a wife unless he were justified in so doing. If Jeanne married Vidonze, many future comforts might yet be in store for Madame Delimoy ; her good angel folded his wings and fled, and then sophistry claimed her wholly. Jeanne would be so much better off ; she would have dresses, a servant, money when she needed it, instead of being, as her mother had been, poor, and having to work all her life.

“ Cannot I see Edmond’s letter ? ” persisted Jeanne.

Madame Delimoy frowned.

“ I tell you it is not here,” she said. “ How can you doubt me, child ? Why need I have told you anything ? It is as I say,

and I ask you if you wish to leave me here alone and marry Edmond Dupuis? He asks me for you in a formal manner, so I must answer his letter formally.”

Something stirred the young girl's heart; it took voice and cried out that Edmond had not done this cold, heartless thing, just what any stranger might have done; and then she looked at the calm face—so far in the shadow cast by the angle of the chimney, with the curtain of checked cotton, that only the severe outline showed—how could she doubt her grandmother.

By this time Madame Delimoy had succeeded in forgetting the glowing words in Edmond's second letter, and she felt freer to deal with Jeanne.

“I must tell you all, child. Monsieur Vidonze says that Edmond Dupuis is courting a rich young widow at Namur. He must be false either to you or her, child, and a false husband will never satisfy you, Jeanne.”



This did not touch the girl as she expected it would. Jeanne sat silent a few moments, then she said :—

“I heard that before. Madame Boulotte told me the day I went to Rimay; but, grandmother, you have taught me to disbelieve gossip. I did not believe it then, nor do I now.”

“Do you mean that you know better than anyone else.” There was an unwonted vivacity about her grandmother to-night that puzzled Jeanne.

“I know Edmond too well to believe that he could act a double part,” said Jeanne hotly.

There was a silence.

“Grandmother,” the girl knelt down before her, “I was hasty—forgive me. I want to be by myself and think. I feel that this is too important a matter to be settled in a hurry. Can you not wait till to-morrow morning before you write to Edmond.”

Madame Delimoy paused too, but it was only to get strength for what lay before her.

“No Jeanne,” she said, “I never put off things, it must be done to-day. You have time to think, it is but four o’clock, and we have still some hours before bedtime; but I must ask you to write that letter to-night, it will then be ready for the postman as he passes on his way to Rimay.”

Jeanne made no answer. She rose from her knees and went up the creaking outside staircase to her own room.

It was only a little room with a tiny window under the eaves, but it was her own.

Up here there was some daylight left; quite enough to reveal two photographs beside the little bed—the father and mother of Jeanne. He was in the uniform of a captain of infantry, a fine-looking man, and she had a sweet, bright face, in which it was easy to see the likeness to her daughter.

Jeanne stood looking at them, and she sighed. She knew how they had loved one another though they were poor, and she had pictured a life of happiness with Edmond just like theirs.

What was poverty to her? She had never been rich, except in happiness. But now!—— She walked up and down, up and down. Once she knelt and prayed for light and guidance; but she could not see clearly. As she walked up and down again, she remembered a sentence she had once read, “Let self be last always.” She paused, thrilled through with the fitness the words seemed to have to her own case. She remembered that her mother had said she should live again in Madame Delimoy, and then Jeanne stood still writhing, while a short fierce struggle was tearing her heart.

Hot tears came when it ended, and thick, choking sobs; but they were soon over. The girl put out all her young firm

strength, she knew she must not hesitate, for if she gave way ever so little now the battle must begin again. She only waited till her eyes were quite dry and her breathing was calm, and then she went downstairs.

“I am ready, grandmother,” she said.  
“I can write the letter for you now.”

## CHAPTER IX.

## MADAME DELIMOY'S ANSWER.

THE end of the week brought Edmond Dupuis his answer.

It was very short, written by Jeanne ; in the name of her grandmother.

Edmond grew white, as he saw the few regularly written lines ; he read them twice before he could take in their meaning.

Dear Sir,

Jeanne thanks you, and so do I, for the honour you have done us, but she has resolved not to leave me while I live.

Your servant,

BARBE DELIMOY.

He looked eagerly for some postscript, same token that Jeanne had felt the love he had poured out so fondly in his letter to her, there was not a word ; he stood overwhelmed with mighty sorrow, and then sobs burst from his aching heart.

“ Ah ! Jeanne, I thought you so generous, so pitiful, even if you cannot give up all for me, you need not scorn my love ! ”

He stood still, utterly crushed ; he had no one to whom he could go for comfort, and he could not bear his own sorrow. He had taken every thought to Jeanne for her counsel, her sympathy, and now she had cast him off.

“ She cannot love. She is cold, cold as a stone, or she could not have written that letter. ”

He shrank from seeing anyone, and shut himself up with his sorrow.

So long as Monsieur Baconfoy saw his young cousin walking with others, or even

smoking by himself beside the river, he did not trouble himself about him.

“He might come and see me now and then,” the inn-keeper said ; “even if something has gone wrong with him, but he is young, and the young cannot be like the old ; they must wait for wisdom as peaches wait for sunshine.”

Spite of his reputed cynicism, he had been a kind friend to young Dupuis ; yet it did not occur to him that because he was a rich relation he had a right to call the young man ungrateful for staying away from La Grue. But when three days went by, and he missed Edmond from all his usual haunts, the big, genial-looking man became anxious. He loved his cousin very dearly, and on this third evening Monsieur Baconfoy sallied forth, and after many friendly hand-shakes by the way (for he knew everyone worth knowing in Namur), he climbed the stairs of his cousin's lodgings, and tapped at Edmond's door.

"Come in!" was said in a hard, unwelcoming tone; but Monsieur Baconfoy had his own suspicions about Edmond's fit of solitude, and he went in without comment.

"I thought you might be ill, or in low spirits"—as he seated himself he saw how haggard the young fellow looked, and noted his tangled hair and neglected appearance—"so I told Henri to bring round a couple of bottles of champagne."

"Thank you, Jules," Edmond stretched out his hand; "you are very kind, but I am not ill."

"Bah! my friend, you are out of sorts, and that is the same thing. If a thing cannot be remedied, Edmond, the best plan is to forget it, not to shut yourself up with it and mope. Have up the champagne, it is a sovereign remedy."

Edmond made a wry face, and shrugged his shoulders in a contradictory fashion. He felt that he was being treated like a sulky schoolboy, but he rang the bell and



bade the maid who answered it bring glasses and the wine that had been sent from the Hôtel la Grue. Meantime Baconfoy had got on his legs again, and was examining two oil-sketches that hung on the otherwise bare white walls.

“When did you do these? I believe you might make a painter, Edmond,” he said, “if you could afford it; but a man can’t live by painting now-a-days, there is not soup and salt in it.”

The champagne came in and saved Edmond the trouble of answering.

Baconfoy filled the glasses. “This is better than women, be they widows or maids,” he said laughing, and, indeed, by the time Edmond had emptied his third glass, life seemed to look brighter; he felt almost ready to open his heart to his cousin.

Jules was, however, so full of talk on all subjects that he had to listen instead, and very soon he congratulated himself that he had not yielded to temptation.

Monsieur Baconfoy's deep, dark eyes glowed with pleasure as he saw the change in Edmond's face.

"Come, my boy" he said, "you look better already; we have not finished though, let us tap the other bottle."

"Ah! by-the-bye," he went on after a pause wherein he had smacked his lips, screwed up his eyes at the wine, and finally *trinquéd* with Edmond on the opening of a fresh bottle. "This Madame Boulotte, you know her well, of course?"

"Yes, I know her—I lodged with her," a flush rose in Edmond's face. How ungrateful he had been, she had been so kind to him, and he had only written to her once since he came to Namur.

"This widow seems to be witty," Baconfoy had a very amused smile on his handsome face, "she says—it appears, that I am 'a fossil'—*ma foi* you must have painted me curiously for her, eh, Edmond?"

The young man laughed.

“I told her you were a woman-hater—that was all ; and you know you are, Jules—but I remember she never cared to hear me praise you ;” then a sudden flash of intelligence came into his face, his eyes grew liquid with hope. “But how did you learn this,” he said eagerly, “have you been to Rimay ? Have you seen her ?”

“No,” Baconfoy hesitated an instant, “I have not seen her, I have seen her brother Antoine Vidonze.”

“Has he come back then ? I went to his house, but heard that he was still away.”

Baconfoy was puzzled by his excitement.

“Yes, he is away, but that is not an uncommon thing for a photographer, is it ? He came back the day after he went away for some of his apparatus. I met him in the street. He told me he was going to take the portrait of a young lady you have talked to me about—Mademoiselle Jeanne La Haye.”

Edmond turned so white that Baconfoy stopped, but only for an instant, he saw how it all was now, he had got a clue to his young cousin's behaviour.

"Yes," he filled Edmond's glass, "Vidonze tells me he has always cared for Mademoiselle Jeanne, and now that he is able to keep a wife, he is about to propose to her."

The veins on Edmond's temples stood out in sudden prominence.

"Did he tell you this himself?"

"Yes, I said so."

"Now? since he came back from Rimay?"

"Just so, he says he has spoken to the grandmother."

"Curse him," said Edmond, he jumped up so hastily that he knocked down his glass, which fell on the floor and shattered into fragments. There was a savage scowl on his face, then he snatched up his hat, and without any farewell he left

Monsieur Baconfoy to finish the rest of the champagne.

“Poor boy ! but it is a pity he has left the wine,” said his cousin with a cynical smile.

## CHAPTER X.

## A MOTH.

EDMOND walked on and on, not looking where he was going, till at last he suddenly stopped and found that he had crossed the bridge and was some distance from Namur.

He took off his hat, and the keen winter wind cooled his burning forehead. Self-contempt had made his sorrow yet more bitter. He had believed in Jeanne and in her love—and he had never had it. He did not believe she loved Vidonze, he had heard her laugh at him when he had turned him into ridicule; but she had no love to give to anyone, or she

could not flirt with one man while she refused another. How could he regret what he never had had. How could he still love Jeanne ?

“ I am a fool.” He put his hand up to his forehead, and turned back towards the river, on the opposite side of which lay the bright little town surmounted by its citadel. “ I am grieving over a shadow—the Jeanne I loved would not have had anything to say to Antoine Vidonze. She would have died first, nor could she have written me that letter.”

But he felt utterly desolate. He could not make a confidant of his cousin. Jules was too really kind to laugh at him now, but Edmond well knew that Monsieur Baconfoy’s love of railing against women could not long refrain from such a fine illustration of his creed ; he would cite Jeanne’s conduct as a fresh proof of the heartlessness of her sex. Madame Boulotte would have been a refuge—she

would have listened patiently to the story of his wrongs, but she was at Rimay, and, besides, Antoine Vidonze was her brother. The thought of Madame Boulotte came as a check to the fierce tide of his anger. She had been so kind, always ready to soothe and cheer him, and he had been so ungrateful to her—and then bitterness surged up again.

“Even that was Jeanne’s fault,” he said, “I gave up every thought to her—I was ungrateful to poor Madame Boulotte, I have treated her shamefully. I took all her kindness as a right, but it is all the fault of my love for Jeanne.”

This penitent mood softened him. The sight of his own short-comings made him sensitive to the remembrance of kindness. He flushed as he remembered his cousin’s constant goodness, and he felt that he had behaved to him like a spoiled child. By the time he reached the bridge, he had made up his mind to go to La Grue and tell his



trouble to Monsieur Baconfoy. But by the time he reached the quay the dread of ridicule held him back—Jules was not the sort of comforter he wanted.

“His cynicism would brace me up, no doubt,” he said “but it might make me angry, and I do not care to be angry with Jules twice in one day.”

By this time he was in the street where Madame Ferage lived, and all at once he remembered her existence. Edmond walked on more slowly and he hung down his head, why he had treated this sweet little woman worse than he had treated either his cousin or Madame Boulotte. She had never laughed at him, nor had she reaped the smallest advantage from his friendship, and yet she had always received him kindly, and had shown so much sympathy in his plans and projects ; he had been going to see her almost every day, and now he had left her for nearly a fortnight unvisited.

He had never spoken to her of Jeanne,

Edmond had heard his cousin say that a wise man never praises one woman to another—but, if he spoke of Jeanne now, it would not be to praise her, and he flushed hotly at the thought—Madame Ferage had no pettiness of this kind, she was far above it, and he was not such a coxcomb as to fancy that she would grudge his preference for some one else. No, she was unselfish, she was a friend of a thousand; and, with the natural leaning to exaggerate merit in a friend one has undervalued or neglected, the unhappy young fellow repeated to himself that the sweet little widow was a friend of a thousand and just the confidant he needed.

Perhaps even now, he might not have sought her if fate had not interfered in a fortuitous way, for he shrank from speaking of his trouble, he wanted the remedy without the pain and shame of baring his wound even to the sympathising eyes of sweet Madame Ferage.

He was passing her door when it opened and her maid, Valérie, appeared, basket in hand, coming out to do some shopping. She smiled and nodded when she saw Monsieur Dupuis, and he stopped—something seemed to force him back—to inquire after Madame Ferage.

“Madame is not well,” the woman said. “She is very dull, Monsieur. Will not Monsieur walk in to see her, it would cheer her to see some one.”

Edmond hesitated an instant, and then seeing that Valérie was turning back into the house, he followed her to the sitting-room of Madame Ferage.

When the door opened he saw Pauline sitting in a low chair, with her eyes strained on the opening door. She was very pale; her eyelids looked heavy, and her whole aspect was languid and spiritless. She was in utter contrast to the fresh bright-eyed brunette of a few weeks ago.

“You have been ill, Madame,” Edmond

said anxiously, as he took the hand she offered. Such a cold little hand, and he felt the fingers tremble.

Madame Ferage gave a feeble smile.

"Not actually ill, Monsieur, but out of sorts. I——," her voice quavered as if it were full of tears, and she stopped.

"I am so sorry, and I have not called to ask for you;" then he drew his chair a little nearer, and said ruefully, "what can you have thought of me, if indeed you have noticed my absence?"

Pauline's pale face was full of repressed feeling, and Edmond thought there was reproach in her dark eyes.

He thought that she resented his absence, he did not understand that this timid, distrustful creature could not think herself attractive to anyone. If she sorrowed for his absence it was for herself, because she could not live without his visits.

"It is good of you to come again," she said timidly. "Have you been ill too, Monsieur?"

Edmond got up and went to the window ; as he looked out he saw his cousin on the other side of the street, and he saw that Jules recognised him. He bit his lip and went back to Madame Ferage.

“ I have been in some trouble, and I think care is as bad as sickness,” he said, indifferently.

He did not look at her, but he felt that her eyes were fixed on his face.

“ I think it is worse,” she said. Then with an effort, “ I wish, Monsieur, I were older and wiser, then I might be able to help you in your trouble ; can I, do you think ?” she looked sweetly at him.

She thought he had perhaps some money difficulties ; she could help him so easily, and yet it seemed impossible to approach such a subject with Monsieur Dupuis.

“ You have helped me already, by your kind words,” he looked at her, smiling. “ You don’t know what it is when one is desolate to find such ready

sympathy where one has no claim on it."

"No claim!" Pauline's eyes glowed, and the colour came up in her cheeks; "pardon, Monsieur, you have every claim on my friendship, you have been so kind."

Edmond looked at her gratefully, he felt strongly moved.

"Now you overwhelm me, Madame; all this goodness after my neglect feels like coals of fire. I wish I had come to you with my trouble at first."

Her eyes grew brighter and her cheeks rosier. Poor little Pauline had never felt so happy. Was it real or a dream? she asked herself. Was she really sitting in the very chair in which she had felt so miserable an hour ago, listening to these sweet words from the man she loved?

"You will come again then?" she said joyously. She felt like a child in a bright flower-filled meadow; life lay before her full of joy and beauty, and it was hers; she need no longer stand outside

resigned to see the happiness of others.

Edmond bent his head with a sort of reverence. "I will come again and again if you will let me, Madame; nowhere else can I be so happy."

Suddenly Pauline's hands covered her eyes, and he saw bright tears running through her fingers. By a great effort she kept in her sobs, only a little shuddering shook her shoulders, and her bosom heaved. Next moment she was wiping her tears away, and she tried to smile, though her lips quivered still.

"Forgive me, I am weak from my illness," she said, and she flushed with shame. "I will not be such a baby again."

Edmond was greatly troubled; her tears seemed to him so inexplicable, unless indeed she was still ill.

"Did I vex you?" he said, anxiously.

A sob burst from Pauline; but she waited to steady her voice, before she answered,

"You were only too kind;" but she did not

trust herself to look at Edmond. "I think when one is weak one bears coldness best."

"You are an angel of goodness," he said earnestly, "and in future I will try to deserve your kindness."

There was a pause. He longed to tell her about Jeanne; but it seemed selfish to use this opportunity only to tax her sympathy, when she evidently was still suffering, so instead, he tried to amuse and cheer her. He told her some of the town events, and about the eccentricities of some of the workmen engaged on the fresh line of railway, and soon Pauline was laughing like a girl; all sadness had left her face.

"I may come again to-morrow," and he held her hand as he said good-bye.

"Yes, please, come whenever you can," said Madame Ferage, gaily; "that is, I mean whenever you can spare time to do so. See how much good you have done me." She gave him a little shy glance full of gratitude.



He went away thinking how sweet and humble this woman was. She possessed so much on which other women might have valued themselves; but she was quite emptied of self—intent on seeking the comfort or happiness of others. Yes, Madame Ferage was excellent, as good as possible, and yet Edmond felt that the relief he had found in her society was only temporary; she faded out of his thoughts before he had reached his lodgings, and the gnawing pain of baffled hope, the cold sickness of his disappointment, came back.

He longed more than ever to pour out the story of his sorrow, and to be comforted, and yet the only woman he had ever seen in whom he could trust, who inspired him with that sort of reverence which he felt almost without knowing, was she who had dealt him this wound, who had changed his joy into such bitterness.

Sadly and sorrowfully he mounted the stairs; and went into his room; he

cleared away the traces of his cousin's visit, and then he went to the desk where he kept his papers. He had not much to remind him of his lost love. There had been from the first a happy joyousness in his intercourse with Jeanne, which had eliminated from it any germ of distrust, and it may be that what is called the sentiment of affection—the sentiment that treasures tokens of a beloved presence—has its origin in that doubt which must be inseparable from the truest love till marriage has sealed its perfection.

Edmond could only find a medal, which one day half in sport he had stolen from Jeanne, and a bunch of withered crocus flowers which she had gathered for him not long before his visit to Namur. Yes, here was something else carefully wrapped up in tissue paper, and put away in a corner—a pincushion, made by her in blue and silver, Edmond's favourite colours. He tore open the wrappings indignantly, and flung

the pretty delicate token into a little heap of dust which had accumulated behind his stove ; he crushed the flowers, which turned to powder in his angry grasp, and sent them with the medal to join the pincushion. Then he stood pale and stern-looking, and wholly dissatisfied with himself.

If he had thought by flinging away these the only tokens of Jeanne's outside presence to get rid of his sorrow, he had made a great mistake. Her image felt like lead in his heart, and all his faculties seemed chained to the depressing influence. He writhed under the suffering it was beyond his power to bear. He thought that, if he went on shut up alone with it, he might do some desperate action. He resolved to go back to his work next day. As for to-night—he paused and looked round him, then he took up his hat—he would go to the café ; he should be sure to find some acquaintance there, and they could finish the evening at the theatre.

## CHAPTER XI.

## SORROW.

THE cottage beside the Meuse had two rooms on the ground-floor; one into which the door opened, the living room, and leading from it, by a little door opposite the entrance of the cow-stable, was Madame Delimoy's bed-chamber.

Behind the living room was a little shed for the goats, and beside this a rough flight of wooden steps, sheltered by the projecting eaves of thatch above, led to the small room in the gable. This was Jeanne's kingdom, and it was pretty to see how her orderly ways and simple taste had transformed the bare white-

washed sleeping-place into a snug little room. Some old red and yellow chintz, once her mother's, made hangings for her little bed; between the portraits of her father and her mother, on the dark walls, she had placed a photograph of Namur which Edmond had one day given her. Above these was a large cross made of rushes and of dried grass, and near the door a quaint old brass benitier with a crucifix.

There was no *armoire*, a large walnut wood chest held Jeanne's small wardrobe, and two little tables and a couple of chairs made all her furniture; but one of the tables held washing things, and Jeanne's little mirror was fixed against the wall above it; the other table, placed in the low window, held part of her little store of books. The rest were on a shelf above the table. When first she had come to the cottage her grandmother proposed to share her own room with Jeanne; but the girl refused, thinking it would disturb Madame Delimoy's

solitary habits. She felt deeply thankful now to have a refuge where she could sob out her sorrow undisturbed, for Jeanne had not Edmond's longing for sympathy. To no human being could she have poured out the torrent which, when she reached her little nest on this sad night, burst from its long repression.

All through this day keen anxiety to learn the contents of Edmond's letter had kept away the haunting disquiet which Madame Boulotte's news had created, and now to have the proof that this had been mere gossip; Edmond's love was still hers, and yet she had been compelled to cast it from her.

She had yielded to her grandmother's will; but her nature rose in unconquerable revolt; the deep roots of her love made themselves felt as she thrilled from head to foot with anguish. She would not give up Edmond's love; she would write to him and tell him this. She would not

break her promise to her grandmother, but if he would wait for her she would be true to him. This resolution was the outcome of some hours of sadness, long weary hours, after she lay down to rest in the passive fashion in which we fulfil ordinary functions from mere force of habit. Jeanne's eyes had watched the darkness, and had seen through her uncurtained window, as she lay facing it, the bright cold stars look in upon her as they moved slowly across the valley. Should she lie here sorrowfully every night till she got stiff and old like her grandmother, with no feeling for the suffering of others.

It was almost the first harsh thought that had come to Jeanne, and she turned from it penitently. She had prayed fervently before she lay down, and it seemed terrible to her that such an evil thought should come to her in the darkness. She had resolved when she rose from her knees to put her grandmother out of the question,

to tell herself that it was God's will that she and Edmond should be parted; but then the fierce struggle had come and resignation fled again.

Now, as this new idea dawned, she softened. She wondered whether she might write to Edmond, and tell him she loved him. She would go next day to her old friend Monsieur le Curé, he would give her safe counsel. And lulled by the soothing that a decided purpose always brings to trouble, Jeanne fell heavily asleep.

She awakened suddenly. Dawn was struggling into her room, though the darkness still filled the corners, and seemed loth to depart. Jeanne knew that it was still very early, and yet some strange feeling upbraided her for lying in bed. A dim sense of misfortune pressed on her with clammy weight, and then she smiled sadly as she raised herself on her elbow from the cloud of fair hair spread over



her pillow. It was the memory of her great trouble which had come back.

But she felt too restless to lie any longer, so she rose and went to the window, and looked out, her fair hair falling like a cloak below her waist.

How still and lovely the river was in the soft haze of morning light, while the hills on the further side were like phantoms in their indistinct, shadowy colour.

Jeanne dressed hastily and went downstairs. She looked into the cow-stable; Felix was sound asleep in the little bed railed off from Merette's sleeping-place; so Jeanne went back into the living-room and lit the fire herself; then she swept the floor, and hung the kettle on the hook in the chimney, so as to have her grandmother's coffee ready. She always took this to Madame Delimoy before she rose, as soon as Felix had milked Merette and taken her out to pasture; but it seemed too early for this; there was no use in

disturbing grandmother before her usual hour, and poor little Felix too should have his sleep out.

Jeanne ground her coffee and set it on to boil; then her thoughts took up the resolution of last night. In the daylight, or rather in this grey forerunner of day, her project seemed too bold, and a warm blush bloomed on her cheeks, but soon this was checked. If she did not tell Edmond she loved him, how could he ever know it? and might he not in simple despair go and marry some one else, and so divide himself for ever from Jeanne? But this was too terrible; the idea of Edmond married to some one else seemed to crush life out of Jeanne. Even if she were parted from him now, she could love him and think of him without sin—but if he were to have a wife!——

Jeanne clasped both hands over her eyes, to try to shut out this maddening vision. She prayed as she stood thus struggling with

herself, for it seemed to her she was growing wicked.

“I cannot help it,” she said at last, faintly, while she drew her hands from her face, and let them fall by her side; “I must always love him, come what may. I belong to him; he fills my heart.”

There were footsteps outside, and then she heard the postman’s rapid steps as he went on along the road behind the cottage; he had taken the letter she had written at her grandmother’s dictation, from under the eaves of the shed where she had put it last night.

Jeanne started out of her reverie, a cold dread passed over her—it was decided. She sighed heavily; and now she heard Felix awake talking to Merette. She had left the door into the cow-stable half-open, and soon the boy came in with a great brass jug of milk. Jeanne put some into the pot to boil with her coffee, and then having poured out a steaming cupful, and cutting a slice of

dark-looking bread, she placed them on a tray, and opened the door leading into her grandmother's bedroom.

Madame Delimoy was generally awake when Jeanne came in, but this morning she did not answer the girl's "Good morning." Jeanne set down the tray on an *armoire* beside the door, and then she went up to the bed placed beside the wall facing the window. Her grandmother's eyes were wide open, but Jeanne recognised with terror the speechless gaze and the stern fixedness of the long straight face. This was how she had looked once before, and Jeanne remembered how ill she had been afterwards, and that the doctor had said it was a fit.

Bending hurriedly over the rigid form, she saw that the further side of the face, the right side, was distorted. She touched it, and then, when she felt how chill it was, a great horror seized on the girl. Could it be that her grandmother was

dead? For an instant she quivered from head to foot, and then she hurried back and called Felix.

“Felix,” she said, “you must go as fast as you can to Rimay, and fetch the doctor.”

Then, going back to the bed, she tried all the simple means she knew to restore animation. In vain; and yet Jeanne felt that life still lingered, for the eyes had consciousness, and seemed to watch all her efforts with a kind of mockery.

At last she sat down beside the bed exhausted. She had tried to moisten the pale lips, but no answering movement had come. Now they seemed slightly to quiver. Jeanne rose swiftly and noiselessly, and with a feather dipped in coffee touched the death-like mouth. This time there was plainly an effort to swallow, and the girl persevered till once more the lips stiffened, and the face looked as still as that of a corpse.

Jeanne sat beside the bed, stupefied with grief and fear ; she could not think, or even pray ; she felt so speechless that at last she roused herself by a kind of force.

“Oh, grandmother,” she cried in a strange hoarse voice that seemed not to belong to her, “are you gone from me just when I had been thinking harshly of you ? Can I never atone ?”

Did she hear ? The eyes had now a fuller consciousness, Jeanne thought, in their dumb strained gaze.

Morning had come cheerfully, bringing a flood of sunshine into the little room. Jeanne left her post more than once to heap wood on the fire in the next room, and then she went out at the back of the cottage and looked along the road that led to Rimay.

“Surely Felix is very long,” she said to herself, and then a look across the valley at the sun showed her that she was impatient.

She waited a longer interval, but now as she looked out again it seemed to her he must really be in sight. As she stepped out so as to see beyond the shed, some one was coming along the road from Rimay. He was too far off to distinguish, but Jeanne saw that he was much too tall for Felix, too tall for the doctor even. In a few minutes she saw that it was Antoine Vidonze.

Jeanne forgot her old dislike; she was so heartily thankful that her lonely watch was ended. Vidonze saw her, and he called out before he reached the cottage—

“It is all right, Mademoiselle Jeanne; the doctor will be here as soon as he can.”

Then, as he came up to the pale anxious girl, he went on hurriedly,

“I met Felix on his way to Rimay, so I hastened on with the message to save delay, and the doctor gave me this for you,” he put a small phial into her

hand. "You are to get her to take it if possible before he comes."

Jeanne shook her head.

"I will try," she said, "and I thank you heartily for the good deed you have done. Will you come in and rest yourself, Monsieur?"

For Monsieur Vidonze had pulled out his yellow handkerchief and stood wiping his forehead, while his breath came in gasps and his bronzed face had grown a deep red.

He followed Jeanne into the cottage.

"Is it likely I should have run so far just to walk back again," he muttered; and while Jeanne went back to her grandmother, he placed himself in Madame Delimoy's easy chair, and helped himself to some coffee from the pot that stood on the hearth.



## CHAPTER XII.

## A CRISIS.

ANTOINE VIDONZE had the special talent one usually finds in a nature lacking true nobility. He could subdue all show of feeling to serve the one purpose he had determined to execute—even when this repression taxed his utmost strength of will. Day after day found him at the cottage, and though more than once Jeanne assured him that he could be of no farther use, and that she disliked taking up so much of his time, he had always some smiling reason to give for his presence, and, indeed, Jeanne so seldom left the sick-room that she saw little of him.

A fortnight had gone by since that terrible shock had come to Jeanne in her grandmother's bed-room, and the doctor told her that it could now only be a question of how long life would linger in the still, powerless form of Madame Delimoy, it might be only days, it might be weeks. At times she seemed conscious, but the power of speech had left her for ever.

Sometimes it seemed to Jeanne, as she sat looking at the rigid face, that there was an intense yearning in the eyes, that the soul strove so hard to find a voice, that some miracle would be worked, and that her grandmother must burst through the living death which held her. At first the girl had insisted on nursing her entirely, but the Curé who came to see Madame Delimoy, would not permit this to go on, and for the last week the mother of Felix, a dull, quiet woman called Rose, had been installed in the cottage as Jeanne's assistant.

One morning, when daylight came fully into the room, Jeanne fancied she saw a change on the rigid face. The doctor did not now come every day. He had told Jeanne to send for him in case of need, and she thought the time for this had come.

She went quickly into the outer room.

“Where is Felix?” she said, “I must send him to Rimay.”

“He went to Rimay an hour ago, with Monsieur Vidonze.”

Bright colour flew into Jeanne’s face.

“How could you let Felix go?” she said gravely.

“Monsieur Vidonze said he was to go ;” the woman looked at Jeanne with surprise.

“Monsieur Vidonze has no authority over Felix. Well, I cannot help it ; as you have let the boy go without my leave, you must walk to Rimay yourself, Rose, and fetch the doctor. There is a change in my grandmother.”

The dull square woman opened her mouth and eyes in dismay.

“I could never get to Rimay, Made-moiselle, I have not in all my life walked so far. I am sorry you are angry, but Monsieur has told me, and Felix too, that he is master here; so the poor child thought he was doing right to obey him.”

“Master here !” Jeanne gave a little stamp of indignation, “there will never be a master here,” she said scornfully, “and Madame Delimoy is mistress while she lives. When Monsieur Vidonze comes back let me know, Rose, I must speak to him.”

She spoke so haughtily that the woman looked at her in surprise, but, even before Jeanne reached the bedside again, her mood had changed.

“May God forgive me,” she said, “how can I give way to anger when she, perhaps, is passing away ?”

There was nothing to be done but to wait for the boy's return, and Jeanne sat beside the bed with the sickening feeling that perhaps the doctor's presence might be of vital importance, and yet she dared not leave her grandmother to seek him.

It seemed as if hours had passed when the woman put her head into the room.

"There are visitors for you, Mademoiselle," she said, "a gentleman and lady. I told them you were busy, but they say you expect them."

Jeanne looked perplexed, but she signed to Rose to take her place beside the bed while she went into the outer room; she had forgotten her chance-meeting the day before her grandmother's seizure, and the sight of two friendly-faced strangers standing in the open doorway took her by surprise.

A thin, grey-haired man, with a timid countenance, stood beside a tall lady, whose face literally beamed at the sight

of Jeanne—it was a beautiful old face, the dark eyes full of fire—though just now they were so sweet; the well set head and delicate features suited the refined voice and manner of the speaker, for she began to speak directly she saw Jeanne.

“I fear we come at a sad time, my dear child, but I wished to keep my word, and we had not heard of your trouble till your servant told us. Is your grandmother so very ill?”

“She is very ill,” Jeanne said sadly.

“Then you must not leave her.” The lady spoke with a quiet decision which drew the girl’s heart out to her; it seemed as if she had found her mother again. “Remember,” the lady took Jeanne’s hand and looked at her earnestly, “we are at Rimay at the Singe d’Or, and we will leave our address there when we go away. If there is anything we can do, you will let us know—will you not?”

“Are you going there now?” said

Jeanne, simply, and the lady nodded. "Will you send me the doctor," said Jeanne; "it has done me good to see you, Madame."

The lady bent forward and kissed her on both cheeks.

"I shall come again, my child; you have not seen the last of me. *Au revoir*, I shall send the doctor at once."

Her smile was full of sunshine.

Jeanne turned from the door, cheered and comforted. It seemed as if she had inhaled a sea-breeze. That kind, firm face had been a tonic to her sickening anxiety. She found no change in her patient when she again took her place by the bedside.

Jeanne sat musing over her visitor. This lady seemed to the girl very superior to any one with whom she had come in contact, and yet she did not feel afraid of her.

"She looks as if she had no hidden shoals of temper one need beware of, no concealments," said the girl, with a sigh.

“She would blame fearlessly if she saw need for it, but she would always be just.”

More than once during the long dark nights, while she sat watching her grandmother, Jeanne's heart had ached sorely. It seemed to her that it had been cruelly unjust to make her write that letter to Edmond, and that she had been wrong to do it. She might have left him free, but she might have owned her love for him. She might have said : “I cannot leave my grandmother, but I love you, Edmond. I will always love you.” If she felt such dear delight in knowing that he loved her, would it not have given him some pleasure to know that his love was returned ? She had been foolish and wrong even to give up her own will so entirely, she ought to have thought more of Edmond. And then a glance at the still figure on the bed made the girl feel full of self-reproach. How could she blame the last parent she had left ? to whom perhaps



she should never speak again. Nor could she keep to her resolution of writing to Edmond. Sometimes, when hope revived, she had resolved that when Madame Delimoy recovered she would ask her to write to Edmond, and explain the reason of her refusal.

“Grandmother will get well, and she will tell Edmond I love him and we shall be happy again,” she had said softly to herself, for indeed it seemed to Jeanne that there was no need to hurry. She and Edmond could be so happy to wait if they saw one another sometimes.

To-day she banished these anticipations, and even when she thought of her visitor she checked her admiration ; it seemed as if indirectly she were blaming her dying grandmother.

At length she heard a stir in the room outside, and voices. Rose put in her head again, and said Monsieur Vidonze had come back.

“ You can stay here then, Rose,” the girl spoke decidedly. “ Stay here while I goin.”

She walked into the outer room ; her head even more erect than usual. This interference must be put an end to. She had determined to tell Monsieur Vidonze she did not need his services.

He was standing before the hearth warming his hands and stirring up a blaze from the logs which had been burning dully. He looked very tall and bulky as he stood before the low projecting mantelshelf, bordered by a narrow curtain of blue check ; the firelight glowed on his red beard and bronzed face. Some people might have called him a fine, soldierly-looking man, but Jeanne thought he only looked coarse and insolent.

“ Monsieur Vidonze ”—he had begun to speak—but she went on without listening, “ I thank you for your interest in my grandmother, and for what you have done ; but I must ask you to go away. I prefer to be left alone.”

He bowed, and gave her a long smiling look ; a look that made Jeanne timid for an instant. Next moment her courage came back.

“ I cannot leave you alone,” he said. “ I have a *right* to protect you, Jeanne.”

She flushed scarlet—he had never called her Jeanne till now.

“ You have no right, Monsieur ; and I ask you to go away and leave me in peace—where is Felix ?”

“ He will be here soon,” Vidonze said coolly. “ I left him to bring some things I wanted. I knew that my presence here would be necessary to-morrow ;” then, seeing that Jeanne looked really displeased, he added : “ My dear child, there is no use in deceiving yourself, the doctor said to me she ”—he jerked his head towards the inner room—“ would last about a fortnight, and the fortnight ended this morning. You will soon need my services.”

Jeanne’s angry flush had faded. She

knew that Vidonze was right, and yet she shrank from the reality of death.

“It may be so,” she said quietly; “but that is another reason why you should go away. Your presence here troubles me, and I cannot bear to be disputing with you while she lies dying.”

He took her hand and held it tightly grasped.

“Listen quietly for a few moments,” he said, “and I will let you go. I know you are good and dutiful, Jeanne, and I have something important to tell you. The day before she was taken ill, your grandmother promised you to me, and she also promised to come and live with us at Namur. Now you know what I mean when I say I have a right to protect you, dear child.”

Jeanne twitched her fingers away. She felt a sudden chill, and she stood silent. Then she said—“I cannot help it, Monsieur, I made no promise, and I do not

acknowledge your right over me; I wish you to leave the cottage."

Again Vidonze smiled.

"Child, do you forget that you are under age, and a promise once made by your parent must bind you even after her death?"

Jeanne shuddered, in her ignorance she did not know what to think, she only knew that she could not marry without her grandmother's consent.

"She may live, and if she does she will retract her promise, she will not give me to you."

Jeanne spoke doggedly, for Vidonze's words only strengthened the fear that pressed on her. She was in a sore strait, her grandmother was leaving her—the last living relative she had to cling to; henceforth she had no one on whom she had a claim for help and guidance. But she must show this insolent man that she was

able to protect and guide herself, she did not want his guidance.

He had stood looking at her after her last words. He thought she was very attractive in this defiant mood, her resistance gave a zest to his wooing. He walked across and seated himself in Madame Delimoy's arm-chair in a leisurely manner.

"We had better understand one another, dear child," he said, "you refuse me because you have a liking for young Dupuis ; he would not suit you, Jeanne, if you married him, you would soon despise him, he will never make his way in the world, he is too easy-going and extravagant. No, my sweet friend, Dupuis will never be able to keep a wife."

Jeanne had started at first and bent her head—she now stood erect growing paler every instant.

"Monsieur," she said haughtily, "I did not come here to talk to you, I came to ask you to leave the house, and I wait for

you to do so ; all this while you are keeping me from my grandmother."

" You are talking nonsense, dear child ; your grandmother is already dead to your presence or absence, and you can listen to a few more words ; when they are said, I will depart."

She gave a sigh of relief and waited.

" I was going to tell you some news which you will hear the first time you go to Rimay. Dupuis is about to marry Madame Ferage—she is young and pretty, and she is rich, so that the lucky fellow will be able to indulge his humours and tastes without fear of retarding his progress in life—truly, he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth."

Jeannne took no notice, she stood waiting for him to go.

Vidonze kept his large, burning eyes on her face, trying to read the effect of his words—he thought she was incredulous.

" You do not believe me," he said, " but

when you see my sister you will have the proof that I have spoken truly; next time she goes to Namur, she will see Dupuis himself."

He waited, she did not speak, but he saw that her lips were closely pressed together, though she kept her feelings from showing themselves. Vidonze got up and stretched himself with lazy assurance.

"*Au revoir*, dear child," he said "you shall not be hurried or pressed in any way, but you have too much good sense and feeling to oppose your grandmother's last wishes, and you cannot at your age live without a protector."

Jeanne clenched her hands as they hung down beside her. She so longed to speak, but she knew that this would only give Vidonze an excuse for staying, and she was determined he should go.

He walked slowly across the room. At the door, however, he turned round again.



“After all,” he said, “you will want me by and bye. You cannot do without me, Jeanne.”

The girl turned round on him, her bosom heaved, her eyes sparkled with anger, but before she could speak the door opened and the doctor came in.

At once he noted the agitation in Jeanne’s face, and his quick observant eyes travelled on to Vidonze.

“Has anything happened,” he said gravely, “is she dead?”

Jeanne shrank as if from a blow ; it was terrible to think that she could be feeling angry with anyone when death might come any minute into the cottage, but still she could not bear to leave Monsieur Vidonze master of the field.

She led the way to her grandmother’s room, the little doctor admiring her shapely figure as he went with her ; but before she opened the door, Jeanne said :

“Good-bye, Monsieur Vidonze, “you can do nothing for me now.”

The doctor went to the bedside, but his examination was short. He came up to Jeanne, who stood by the window.

“She is going now,” he said “and you can do nothing for her.”

Jeanne turned from him to the woman, who had risen as they came in, and who now stood beside the bed.

“Rose,” she said, “go quickly and tell Monsieur le Curé how it is with my grandmother.”

## CHAPTER XIII.

## CONSEQUENCES.

THERE are plenty of sentences and maxims used both by silly and wise persons; used so commonly that often their deepest meanings are hardly perceived. Like the stones on a well-kept road, these have sunk out of sight by usage. Now and then some one trite axiom fits our own case, and then either we see the meaning it holds hidden, or else we create a special application therefrom. The truth, however trite, that life is a circle, and that we are but links of the chain of which this circle is made, has never been more fully illustrated than by the thrill of trouble

that spread from the cottage beside the Meuse to the pretty little house of the widow, and to that sad young bachelor, Edmond Dupuis.

It must be said, however, that Edmond's sadness had been gradually diminishing. He went often now to see Madame Ferage, and her sweetness and gentle sympathy always sent him away soothed and refreshed. Soon—very soon, he thought he should put full confidence in this kind, devoted friend, and tell her of Jeanne's hard-heartedness. Of late he had grown to think he was unjust in calling Jeanne faithless; he felt sure she had never really loved him, or she could not so soon have changed. The longer he reflected on the firm, steadfast nature which had so charmed him, and which he so truly felt to be the necessary completion of his own, the more sure he became that only the force of his love had acted on Jeanne; she had only felt for him, all through, the

sisterly regard she had shown, for how slight a response had she made to his confession of love! Even if he had married her he would have found nothing deeper beneath this pleasant, calm surface. Yes, she was cold, yet when his thoughts reached this point he always flung away desperately from the attempt at self-consolation.

He knew that nothing could have made him yield up Jeanne if she only would have been his. He did not believe that she loved Vidonze, or would accept him; it seemed to him far more likely, cold, and good, and dutiful as she was, that she had been passive in the hands of her grandmother. She would never love anyone.

Meantime his visits only served to deepen the trouble of the young widow.

On that afternoon when Edmond first reappeared after his long desertion, hope had suddenly come to life in the poor heart that had known so little of it, or of any joy.

Pauline hardly dared to say to herself that Monsieur Dupuis loved her; but still she hoped that he cared for her enough for love to come by and bye. He came again, but there was no change in his manner; no reflection of the intense joy she felt at the sight of him; no sign even of repressed feeling, he was kind and quite at ease. Pauline grew sadder and sadder in the intervals between his visits. To him she strove to be as gay and bright as possible; for worlds this poor little hungry heart would not have betrayed its secret, lest the discovery should alarm her friend and so alienate him; but when Edmond came in smiling and looked straight into her eyes, with friendly assurance, her heart ached sorely under her bright return to his greeting. Something seemed to warn her that these frequent visits, this seemingly devoted friendship, had no hidden meaning, and would never change in character.

On the morning after his fourth visit, while she sat alone thinking this all over in the sickening certainty that it would have been better for her if she had kept to her dull untroubled life, and never seen Edmond Dupuis, a visitor was announced, and in came Madame Henroteaux, the old lady at whose house she had first seen Monsieur Dupuis.

Madame Henroteaux looked grave; her flat, pink face was stiff with formality, and her small, sunken eyes had a restless expression.

Usually she was full of talk, but to-day she answered Pauline's friendly inquiries after the health of her seven daughters almost in monosyllables.

After more than one pause, during which the visitor looked round the pretty room as if she were seeking for something to find fault with, Madame Ferage said gently :—

“Is there anything the matter, my dear friend?”

Madame Henroteaux's head was jerked back, and she gave a kind of hostile snort, as if she would declare she was challenged to the attack.

"I cannot tell you, my dear child, until I know the real state of matters ; it may be right ; but it may be lamentably wrong—lamentably wrong," she said, with an exasperating volubility.

"I do not understand." Pauline felt frightened by her visitor's unusual manner.

Madame Henroteaux nodded with excited importance.

"I will explain." She lowered her voice and looked mysterious, while Pauline felt divided between alarm and a strong inclination to laugh at this pompous preamble.

"May I ask if you are about to marry Monsieur Dupuis, Madame Ferage?"

Pauline grew rosy with blushes.

"No," she said in a timid voice.

Madame Henroteaux drew her chair a little away, and shook her head.



“I was afraid of this,” she said, sadly ;  
“you are young, my dear child, and I  
am aware that you are inexperienced ;  
but you are old enough to know better.”

Pauline looked utterly surprised.

“Really, Madame,” she said, quickly,  
“I must ask you to explain yourself.”  
This was beyond her patience.

Madame Henroteaux waved her hand ;  
she had got her speech by heart, for she  
had felt sure she should have to deliver it,  
and she wished to do this without in-  
terruption.

“I repeat that you ought to know better  
—any woman ought to know that so very  
great an intimacy cannot be carried on  
with a gentleman without giving cause for  
scandal ; unless, indeed, there is a cause  
for it beyond mere friendship.”

Madame Heuroteaux had intended Ed-  
mond Dupuis to marry the eldest of her  
seven daughters as soon as he was rich

enough, and her outraged propriety had consequently a double edge.

Pauline looked frightened and unhappy.

“What can I do, Madame?” she said.  
“I like him; how can I tell him I do not care for his visits?”

The visitor gave a little repressive cough, and sat up stiffly.

“I scarcely see, Madame, what would become of womankind, or society in general, if every woman is to do exactly what she likes. Besides, in allowing Monsieur Dupuis privileges which you must permit me to say a more correct thinking woman would not allow, you lower his opinion of the whole sex; you must excuse me if I speak plainly,” Pauline had flushed a deep red at her words, “but it is the part of a true friend to warn you of the risk you run.”

“You receive Monsieur Dupuis’ visits, Madame, and you are a widow,” Pauline

flashed out at last in the agony of her mortification.

“I,” with much emphasis, Madame Henroteaux smiled complacently; she was middle-aged, ugly and bony, and she had seven daughters, but she felt that a second marriage was not impossible, that is, if she could be brought to consent to it. “My dear friend, there is a great difference between us. No one ever saw me give a man the slightest encouragement at any period of my life.”

“I do not know what you mean,” said poor Pauline, hotly. “Do you mean to say that I ought only to receive the visits of women?”

Madame Henroteaux shook her head.

“You are not so ready-witted as usual, my dear friend,” there was a tinge of contempt in her tone. “I said nothing about the sex of your visitors. Monsieur Dupuis or Monsieur any-one-else may visit you in moderation; but a young woman in your

unprotected position—for remember, children are a shield against the world's calumny—a young woman in your position should treat all her friends alike, and should have no greater intimacy with one than another.”

Pauline panted with vexation.

“That is absurd, Madame. How can I help myself? I like to see Monsieur Dupuis when he calls. I cannot tell him what is not true.”

“If you have not sufficient dignity to shield your own reputation,” Madame Henroteaux rose, and her stiff skirts shook with suppressed irritation, “there is nothing more to be said, except that it is kindness to warn you that this devoted friend has already distinguished himself by an attachment to a young girl not far from Givet, and also by decided attentions to the widow with whom he lodged before he came to Namur. Have a care both of your heart and of your

reputation, my dear friend." She stopped, for Pauline had turned a deathly white. "I fear Monsieur Dupuis is not a marrying man," she went on, "and if you are wise you will close your door against such a confirmed flirt. Surely you will not compromise yourself and offend all your friends." Then she kissed poor stricken Pauline on both her white cheeks, bade her *au revoir*, and departed.

Pauline sat still in passive misery, but as soon as her visitor went away she had a hearty fit of crying. She did not know what to do. If she gave up Edmond Dupuis' visits, she gave up all the joy of her life. She must go back to the dull, colourless existence she had led before she knew him ; and if she took no notice of this warning and went on receiving him, she should perhaps lose all her friends, and possibly her good name besides.

It was true that these friends were

scarcely more than acquaintances, and that her chief intercourse with them related to charity, or dress, or house-keeping, with sometimes a discussion on public matters concerning the city of Namur; but Pauline trembled at the thought of being once more isolated, with no one but her maid to speak to; and the position hinted at by her friend would be worse than mere isolation. The poor shrinking little creature pictured to herself the changed looks of her acquaintances; they might be capable of passing her by, if they met her in the street, under the eyes of everyone. Pauline shivered and hid her face in her hands. She thought she could not bear to be slighted, and then her lovestung her sharply with self-reproach. If she had Edmond Dupuis' friendship, what need could she have of any other society? Was he not everything to her? Did not every thought centre round him? Would she not give up all that she most

valued so long as she felt sure of his love? Ah! there was the doubt— The strongest blow which her zealous visitor had dealt towards the breaking of Pauline's peace was this doubt of Edmond Dupuis' love for her.

But then what Madame Henroteaux had said might be mere gossip. Pauline could not believe that he would wilfully trifle with a woman's love; and yet, had he not stolen her heart from her without giving in exchange any proof of his own love?

She sat crying and thinking—thinking over the warning she had received, and thinking also of her future behaviour towards Edmond; perhaps his reticence had been her own fault. She was wealthy, and he very likely—for she knew nothing but what he told her about himself—was poor. She thought the very qualities she prized in him, because they were to her new and rare gifts—his fastidious delicacy,

his impatience under the slightest obligation, the cultivated tone, so superior to that of the rest of her acquaintances—all these poor Pauline felt were so many enemies set between herself and the happiness she might have with Edmond Dupuis. Still, it was her own fault. If she had not been so ignorant and foolish she might have seen all this sooner, and have given him more decided encouragement.

She thought this over till she became more hopeful. She even rehearsed to herself an interview in which she thought she would ask his advice about the management of her affairs, and let him see how impossible it was for her to arrange them herself, and also how greatly she preferred his advice to that of anyone else.

She grew gradually more cheerful, and instead of going to bed tearful and miserable, she slept well, and wakened out of a happy dream in which she was the wife of Edmond Dupuis.



This rose-coloured vision cheered her through the next day, but when the time came at which Edmond Dupuis might be expected her courage fled. The remembrance of Madame Henroteaux's warning, the certainty that a watch would be kept on her, pressed distractingly. She felt that if she did not put an end to Edmond's visits she should lose her friends, and yet she could not do anything to elicit the state of his feelings towards her.

"Unless he loves me," she said, "I do not want him to say anything."

Ah ! there was the well-known knock at the door below. She had been expecting him these three days, and her heart beat so wildly that thought was banished. As he came into the room, at the sight of the adored face, the beautiful dark eyes smiling an affectionate greeting, Pauline's resolves and self-control fled together ; she could only yield herself up to the dear delight of being once more with him.

“Have you missed me, Madame?” he said, pleasantly. “I hoped to have come yesterday, but my work was too far off to enable me to return last night. I fear I shall have to take up my abode near it while it is so far away.”

The bright glow which had flushed her cheeks and sparkled in her eyes faded so suddenly, that Edmond thought she must be ill.

“Do—do you mean”—she spoke in a confused stammering way—“that you are going to leave Namur?”

If she had not lost her self-control, the poor child might have seen in this plan an escape from her perplexity, but she had no power of judgment left. She grew whiter every moment, and her eyes filled with tears.

Edmond did not understand her manner.

“Are you faint?” he said, anxiously. “Shall I ring for the maid? or can I get you anything?”

He felt tenderly anxious for this kind little creature, and he knew she had no mother or sister to care for her.

But Pauline scarcely noticed his anxiety, she was so wrought out of herself at the idea of losing him that she seemed carried quite beyond control, her voice even was shriller, strained to a higher pitch, than he had ever heard it.

“Do you mean that you are going away from me?” she cried out. “You cannot, you will not go!”

Her dark eyes seemed to blaze against the stricken paleness of her face, and they met his answering look of wonder—wonder, self-reproach, pity—in one burning glance Pauline saw all these and the utter absence of love; but she had let her feelings carry her too far for self-restraint, in an agony of despairing shame she crouched down in her chair till her forehead rested on her clasped hands.

Edmond stood stupefied.

Pauline's eyes had made the revelation as complete as was her own humiliation, and for some minutes he was blinded by the sudden discovery of her love.

He did not shrink from her, his soft heart went out in tenderest gratitude and pity to this sweet, helpless woman. Was it possible that he was so necessary to her, that the mere thought of losing him had made her betray her feelings for him?

This was love indeed, of which any man might be proud.

Bending down, he drew one of the small brown hands into his own and pressed it gently in his, for the world he would not have her think he presumed on her love.

But the poor child drew her hand away, and giving him one shame-faced miserable glance, started up like a young fawn and darted across the room.

At this Edmond's hesitation fled. He caught her hand before she could open the door.

“Come, come,” he said, soothingly, “I cannot think you will be sorry to lose me if you run away from me now.”

Pauline’s hand trembled in his, but her nervous agitation conquered.

“Please let me go,” she said; “if you have any pity you will let me go.”

She kept her face turned away, but he saw that her slender throat and ear were dyed crimson.

“I will come again soon,” he said, and he loosed her hand; she fled away in an instant.

## CHAPTER XIV.

## LAWING.

EDMOND thought her departure charming, there was a shy grace about it which pleased his exacting taste.

“Poor girl!” he said to himself, as he walked slowly back to his lodging. “I wish I had told her at once about Jeanne, then this could not have happened.”

He went upstairs and sat down in his easy-chair to smoke. A curious sensation warned him that he was not quite truthful in what he had been saying to himself. After all these weeks of soreness and disappointment, it had been very soothing to see the love that he had inspired.

“And I have hardly seen its extent,” he murmured to himself, “the poor little girl strove to hide it; it makes me feel a pitiful fellow not to be able to return it.”

Why—a sudden recollection dawned on him—when he had announced to Jeanne, his intention of leaving Rimay how coolly she had received it, and yet how much greater cause he had given her for love than he had given to this poor Madame Ferage!

“I never concealed my feelings from Jeanne,” he said, bitterly. “I did not speak of them, but she must always have seen that I loved her.”

After this came a vacuum. He could not think, so entirely did the whole affair puzzle him—his own blindness and this terrible sadness. For it was terrible that this poor young widow, whose life, as she had told him, had been so joyless till she made his acquaintance, should have bestowed her love on him. Edmond’s tender heart

ached as he thought over what she must now be suffering, for had he not unconsciously rejected her. So innocent too, and guileless of any attempt to win him; for a less simple woman would have saved herself from betrayal, and have taken slower, surer means of revealing her love, well, then, could he do anything to soothe her mortification and comfort her?

He got up and walked about his room, debating with himself. Was it not selfish of him to cherish a memory—a love which never would be returned, which he suspected never had been returned. Why should he not give his life if he could not give his love to this sweet, adoring girl, who would be entirely devoted to him? He tried to look into the future to see himself as the husband of Madame Ferage. She would be completely happy, and he should have an eternal claim on her gratitude—as much love for her, too, as many husbands feel for their wives. And then



came a lower suggestion, there would be no need to persevere in a profession he did not like; he should be free to write verses and to sketch, surrounded with all the care and charm which a loving woman can twine round a man's life.

Why should he not make Madame Ferage happy? Would it make her happy? would it be right to marry her while Jeanne still reigned in his heart—when he knew that the mere sight of Jeanne would make him forget every tie of duty or kindness—would make him hate the obstacle he had set up between them? And as this thought came, so strong a loathing seized Edmond that he shuddered as if he had suddenly found himself at the edge of a precipice.

What then could he do? He must see Madame Ferage again, he had promised to do so, and he must manfully tell her all the truth. It must, he thought, soothe her to know that he had never seen

her with free eyes, that long before their first meeting his love had been given to Jeanne Lahaye. He tried to think that if it had been otherwise he might have loved the little widow, but he could not do this heartily. The world only held one woman for him, and she was Jeanne.

“I could never have loved at all but for her,” the poor fellow thought. He forgot Pauline and his present trouble. He was again beside Jeanne’s cottage, and then the striking of the clock roused him. “The sooner I get over it the better,” he thought. He was heavy-hearted, for he was sorry to give up his kind little friend, and yet he knew the next time he saw her must be their last meeting. Even if she wished it otherwise, he felt they would be happier apart.

“I must judge for her,” he said, in a thoughtful, protecting way, “she has no mother, or friend, to guide her.”

Usually when he went out, and espe-

cially when he went to see Madame Ferage, he brushed his hair carefully, and took a little pains with his outward appearance, but now he snatched up his hat and went out in a mechanical way that augured ill for his wish to please Pauline.

The poor girl had been going through paroxysms of shame and despair, and then of bitter, unconquerable regret. If she could only have contained herself, only have behaved as any woman should have behaved, he would have gone away and would never have discovered her love. Sometimes a hope leaped up that he might not have understood her love for him. He had at first thought she was ill; might not the tender pity she had seen in his eyes have arisen from this idea. But this was only an occasional gleam in the darkness of her troubled soul.

She had stayed in her room ever since she left him. Sometimes flung in a heap

on her bed, sometimes walking quickly up and down when shame made her feel repose unbearable. She was doing this when there came a tapping at the door.

“Monsieur Dupuis is in the *salon*, Madame,” said the voice of Valérie.

“I cannot face him, he must despise me. I cannot go,” and then she called out, hastily, “that will do, Valérie, you can go down.”

But if she sent him away, should she ever see him again. If he despised her, would he have come back so soon to seek her. He was going away from Namur and she would see him once more.

She smoothed her roughened hair, but she felt that no care could remove the marks of crying from her eyes, they were so red and swollen, and her cheeks were fevered with tears. But looks did not matter, she felt she was nothing to him—less than ever now.

Then she hurried to the door, fearing

that if she paused any longer all courage would flee, opened it, crossed the passage between the two rooms, and walked into the *salon*, with bent head and flushed cheeks.

Edmond waited till she had seated herself, and then he went and stood before her, looking like a criminal.

"Madame," he said, huskily, "I look on you as so true a friend that it seems as if you ought to know all that relates to me."

He waited, but she only bowed her head.

"I must ask you to excuse me if I am presuming too much on your goodness," he said, "but I have been wishing to tell you my own history ever since I knew you, and before we part it seems right to do so."

He paused again, but she only bent her head. She had resolved not to speak unless it became absolutely necessary.

"Years ago," Edmond went on, hoarsely,

and looking straight at the wall before him, "I loved a young girl near Rima. We saw one another often, and I thought she shared my love. Before I came here I asked her to be my wife, but she refused me."

There was a silence after this. Pauline's heart beat so that she could not speak. Edmond's story had raised a storm of opposite feelings. Pain came first, an utter shattering of all hope—and then his last words changed this. At least he was free, no actual tie bound him. She could never be what she longed to be,—the chosen of Edmond's heart—her humble nature saved her from the bitterness such a wound as this would have given to a prouder woman—but he was free; there was no shame in loving him, and she might soothe his sorrow even if she never gained his love.

"Did <sup>\*</sup>you only ask her once?" she said, timidly, wondering at her own words.

Edmond turned half away, trying to hide the pain he knew his face must show.

“It is useless,” he said ; “do not let us talk of her, she can never be my wife.”

Pauline saw the anguish in his face, and her shyness left her. She forgot everything but that he was unhappy.

“I grieve for you—oh, so much,” she said, in so piteous a voice that it reached his heart. “Oh ! how can she help loving you ?”

The contrast struck him forcibly. He had lavished his whole heart on Jeanne. His last letter to her had been, he knew, full of passionate, fervid love, and yet she had not even thought it worth an answer. She who was so tender and kind to all, whose whole life seemed given to others—he remembered bitterly at that moment, the caresses he had seen her bestow even on Merette—and yet she had treated his love with contempt—and he had done nothing—worse than nothing—for this loving

woman. He looked into the eyes of Madame Ferage, how full of tender, timid love they were, and how shy the poor little shrinking creature seemed !

“ I was unworthy of her love, I suppose Madame,” he said, in a choked voice; “ we will not speak of her.”

Pauline longed to say she thought this girl must be unworthy of him, but she felt tongue-tied; she was afraid of vexing Monsieur Dupuis; her eyes were full of sweet tender pity as they met his.

“ How good you are to me !” he said, “ how like an angel in such patient sweetness ! What interest can you take further in such an unlucky, ungrateful fellow as I am ? Yes, I will bid you farewell, you are well quit of me.” He felt full of remorse ; was it possible that Madame Ferage would suffer from love of him what he suffered for Jeanne ?

Pauline was silent for a while ; how could she answer him ? and yet she longed



to tell him the claim he had on her. She should never see him again, she would speak.

“I had no interest in life or in any one,” she tried to steady her trembling voice, and in the effort tears filled her eyes again, and brimmed on the reddened lids, “till I knew you; I was quite without sympathy. Whether you go or stay, all you do must interest me evermore.”

Though the tears welled out ready to fall over her cheeks, she had struggled successfully for composure; her voice sounded calm and quiet before she ceased to speak.

Edmond saw the fast-coming tears; he noted too her efforts to keep down agitation, and a great wave of pity swept over him. With a sudden longing to comfort the sorrow he had caused he seized her hand.

It did not seem to him possible that

Madame Ferage could care for mere friendship from him, or would accept it, but it might soothe her, and please her, he thought, to find that he had wished to devote his life to her. He was in far too impulsive a state to think those thoughts in order, they came confusedly as he pressed her hand tightly, and looked at her timid tear-stained face.

“Madame,” he said earnestly—carried away by the excitement he felt; something seemed to tell him that if he paused his words would remain unspoken—“I have been very frank with you, and now I will speak still more plainly, and you must forgive me. I have no heart to offer to you, or to any woman, but if you can accept friendship instead of the love you deserve, then, indeed, I will try to make you happy; I will give my life to show my gratitude for your great goodness.”

Pauline’s eyes opened widely; surprise kept her silent for a moment, and then she

tried gently to free her hand. But he kept it closely clasped, while his eyes fixed on hers, waiting for her answer.

“You would repent of what you had done,” she said, but the change in her voice struck him, it was timid still, but no longer sad.

“Why should I repent?” he smiled at her, and pressed her hand to his lips. “It is I who should be the gainer; it is you who should weigh well whether you ought to accept friendship only, whether you should give yourself to such an undeserving husband; will you reflect on my words? you shall not be hurried; you shall write to me your decision.”

“I——” then again she drew her hand away and pressed it against its fellow, her heart was so full of joy she could not tell how to answer quietly.

He looked grave, her silence puzzled him.

“I will leave you,” he said, “you shall write me your answer.”

Pauline gave a quick movement, it seemed to her that if she did not now decide she would prove how ungrateful and unappreciative she was of his great goodness towards her.

“Please do not go,” she said, earnestly ; “let me thank you for all your goodness and nobleness, I cannot expect your love—” she paused, then in a low hesitating voice— “I can only have one answer to such kindness ; if you are satisfied to ask me to be your wife, I am very grateful.”

“It is I who am grateful ;” he was deeply touched by her humility ; he put his arm round her and kissed her forehead. “I will try to make you happy,” he said, “you are so good, so divinely humble, that I believe I can.”

Pauline raised the hand that held hers and kissed it fervently.

“My love,” she whispered, “I did not think I could ever feel such joy.”

Edmond stroked her blushing cheek, blushing like a nectarine now, as the warm blood glowed through the clear brown skin.

“You will tell me all your troubles,” he said, “you will let me hear them for you ; you had been crying to-day before I saw you.”

“Yes,” and Pauline’s eyes drooped under his.

“What was it ?” he said, tenderly ; “poor dear little love, you who are always doing good, what can you have to cry for ?”

She smiled up at him with childlike happiness.

“What was said to me can never be said again, so it is ended. I was silly to care about it.”

“Who said it ?” Edmond began to have a dim idea of her meaning.

“Madame Henroteaux came and she

said— but”—Pauline’s courage failed her —“never mind what she said; I was foolish to cry, and now she will not leave off being my friend.”

Edmond drew her to him and kissed her fondly.

“How much you have had to suffer for me,” he said; “but Madame Henroteaux and her circle must be satisfied at once. I shall call on her and ask her for her congratulations on my good fortune.”

“Do not laugh at me,” said poor Pauline, still so unbelieving that she feared to hope; then as he looked at her with surprise she whispered, “I cannot believe in my happiness, I feel as if I should wake up presently and be more unhappy than ever. I—I could not lose you now;” she clasped her hands clingingly on his arm.

Every word she said smote on Edmond’s heart. How she loved him, this sweet creature, whom any man might be proud to call his own; why was he so cold

and ungrateful? Yes, he would try his best to love her, he thought; when once she was his wife this would surely be easy.

“I shall not give you much time to wake up in,” he said, playfully, “I want you to fix our marriage-day, and then I can announce it to Madame Henroteaux.”

Pauline blushed, and hid her face on his shoulder. When he left her she had promised to marry him in three weeks’ time.

## CHAPTER XV.

## TOO LATE.

THERE is something pleasant in the sight of a well-kept house and a well-kept woman—one in whom all looks smooth and in good keeping, where neatness and comeliness are set off by a certain amount of dignity, and also of elegance.

As she sat in her pretty freshly-painted room, creamy white walls, with pale blue mouldings, white lace draperies at the windows, chairs and sofas of a dark wood with blue seats, Madame Boulotte looked as fresh and bright as her surroundings in spite of the more than forty years which had brought a few grey hairs among her



fair frizzed curls—and had changed the dimple in her cheek to a line. Her forehead was wonderfully smooth, and so were her cheeks; her whole face was serene and peaceful, except that the slightly upturned nose and mutinous curve in the upper lip, gave warning that Madame Boulotte was no optimist, and could be contemptuous if it so pleased her. A close observer would have said that her forehead was not square enough, and was rather too high, and that therefore some narrowness of judgment might be looked for, but barring this deficiency, and also a certain self-complacency in the well-cut, regular lips, Madame Boulotte was certainly a very pleasant spectacle in her well-fitting black dress, as she sat, letter in hand, looking at her tall brother.

Antoine Vidonze had risen from the breakfast table, and stood surveying himself in the mirror over the stove on the side of the room opposite the

lace-curtained windows. His bronzed cheeks were deeply red, and this increase of colour had been brought there by Madame Boulotte—if one might judge by the pose of her countenance, for her nose and chin were raised scornfully, and her lips had a contemptuous curve.

There was silence while she tapped one of her plump soft-skinned hands with the taper forefinger of the other.

“Well,” said the photographer roughly, “are you going to give me that letter?”

“My dear Antoine, do be more careful! this is the outcome of your wandering life, you take everything so harshly. I did not say you should not have the letter, I only said *à quoi bon*. You are quite mistaken if you think that Jeanne Lahaye possessed any attraction for Edmond Dupuis.”

Vidonze sneered angrily.

“You women are all alike, each of you thinks that a man has no eyes for anyone

but herself. I tell you that Jeanne Lahaye does care for Dupuis, and he cared for her ; she will not listen to me unless she is sure that he is lost to her, and that letter is just what I want to give her the proof of his desertion."

Madame Boulotte shrugged her shoulders.

"I am going to see Jeanne," she said, "I will show her the letter, poor child ; if she were not in such trouble about her grandmother I should have consulted with her about my dress for the wedding, but there is no time."

"You will not go to see Jeanne till to-morrow ?" he said eagerly.

"No."

"Well then, give me the letter, delays are always dangerous, and I must say what I have to say to Jeanne at once. I may tell her you offer her a home while she remains here?" he spoke eagerly.

Madame Boulotte nodded, but her lip curved more than ever.

“I cannot help smiling at you, Antoine, you are as foolish and flurried as a love-sick boy. Why are you not more self-possessed; you need not excite yourself, Jeanne has no choice, she must marry you, what else can she do? As I said before, you are over-hasty; she will not run away.”

“I don’t know that,” he muttered to himself; then aloud, “You had better give me the letter; one would think it was a draft on the bank, you set such a store by it.”

Madame Boulotte read this letter once more, then she folded it up and gave it to her brother. It had come to her from Namur that morning, and contained an intimation of the engagement, and also a formal invitation to be present at the marriage of Monsieur Edmond Dupuis with Madame Pauline Ferage, *née* Pauline Nicaise; and Madame Boulotte considered it a singular coincidence that to-day was the day after Madame Delimoy’s funeral.

Yesterday her brother, Antoine, had

suddenly announced his intention of marrying Jeanne Lahaye, and Madame Boulotte had not made any objection thereto, for, although the girl would have very little money, she knew that every girl would not marry Antoine, his vagabond life was too fresh as yet in the memory of his acquaintances; and now that after so many years there seemed to be a chance of his making money, Madame Boulotte thought that marriage might steady him, and make him stick to his work as nothing else would do. Jeanne was quiet and industrious and could have no expensive tastes. She was only surprised that Antoine should be so easily satisfied.

“He has been a rolling stone,” she thought, looking at him with some pride, “but he is a fine, well-grown fellow, and he has precisely my eyes and nose—if his eyes were not bloodshot and his nose a trifle red—but that is, of course, the difference between a man’s habits and

a woman's; he is very absurd. Jeanne is too much of a child to have cared for Edmond Dupuis, and he certainly never thought seriously of her."

While she sat thinking, Antoine had put the letter into his pocket and had buttoned up his coat. Now he nodded to his sister, and, running his fingers through his hair, he took up his hat and went out.

Madame Boulotte went on thinking. The longer she thought over Antoine's suspicion about Jeanne, the more likely it seemed to be the truth, and, therefore, the more determined she became not to believe it. Resolutely she shut her eyes to all the little memories which link by link came starting up from the past year, till they formed a chain of evidence which only wilful blindness could discredit.

But Madame Boulotte chose to be wilfully blind to the fact that any attachment to Jeanne had existed on the side of Edmond Dupuis.

“He cared to go to the cottage because it gave him an excuse for rowing, it was only for amusement,” she said, her eyes sparkling and a glow of mortified pride burning under them; “he looked on Jeanne as a child. I understood poor dear Edmond thoroughly, he wanted a steadfast friend, and he had one while he was here;” she sighed softly, and then she frowned, and her smiling lips curved into their most cynical aspect. “But for that fossil of a cousin and this intriguing little widow, we had still been dear friends. However it is sweet of the poor fellow to ask me to his marriage.”

The door opened and Antoine put in his head again.

“If I bring Jeanne back with me can you make room for her to-day,” he said. “I don’t like leaving her in that desolate place.”

Madame Boulotte smiled.

“You are a very ardent lover, my

friend; it is not convenient, but it can be done, only don't come back till evening. I must talk to Marie."

Antoine Vidonze nodded, and set out again on his way to the cottage. His sister's assurance that he would find no difficulty with Jeanne had cheered him more than he knew. She had refused him decidedly, and he had not succeeded in seeing her since Madame Delimoy's death, but he thought sorrow would probably have softened her. Then yesterday he had had a talk with the doctor, an old friend of Madame Delimoy, and he had learned that the annuity on which the pair had lived expired with the grandmother. Jeanne must perforce marry him or support herself.

"She is not a fool," he thought, as he took long steps along the dry, frost-bound road; "she knows her position; and when I ask her to take pity on me and be my wife, she must feel soothed and grateful,



and will be glad to forget all the unkind words she has said to me."

His face darkened as he remembered her scorn, and then the vision of her as she had stood yesterday beside her grandmother's grave, came to take out the sting from this memory. She had looked so pale and sad, with her long, black veil reaching to her knees, yet how grand and noble; there had been none of the sadness of a crushed woman in her face. It had been rather a sadness blended with earnest resolve, as if sadness were set farther back, while energy and hope were ready to strive in the future that lay before her.

Vidonze began to whistle softly as he went along. "She is very beautiful," he said. "She is all I ask for in a wife. I shall soon make her fond of me now that she has the certainty that that fickle gentleman, Dupuis, belongs to some one else. I wish the pair would leave Namur though; I may have to take long journeys

and leave Jeanne at home," he added, perplexed, and then he smiled scornfully. "I shall take Jeanne with me at first; a man is a fool who trusts a woman. Believe only what you see, is my maxim, and only half of that."

He was now very near the cottage, and he looked round him in the hope of seeing Jeanne. He felt unwilling to force himself upon her; besides, he did not want to see her exactly in the place where she had shown such open dislike of his presence. This may seem an unnatural strain of sentiment for Vidonze, but he really loved Jeanne in his own way, and love has a strange transforming power even over a coarse nature. He knew that the girl sometimes went up the little valley where Merette fed, and he turned thitherwards; but after wandering some way up beside the tiny half-frozen stream, he saw no trace of either Jeanne or her cow, and it then occurred to him that probably Merette stayed

in her stable in such weather, and only went down to drink morning and evening beside the Meuse, which was no longer frozen over.

He must summon courage and go boldly into the cottage. He looked round for Felix, who was sometimes sweeping out the stable in front, or chopping wood behind the house, but there was no sign of the boy's presence. The place looked so very solitary, so still; Antoine felt puzzled, and as he stood looking at the upper window, he saw that no smoke was issuing from the chimney. He wondered he had not noticed this before, and the discovery gave him a start of surprise. He raised the latch of the door, but it did not open. Vidonze smiled.

"She expected me," he said, "she is prepared."

He knocked gently. "Jeanne, open; will you not let me in? I have a message from my sister, Madame Boulotte."

Then he stood listening, his ear against the door. He did not expect she would at once open it. No answer came, and he determined to be very patient. He could not hear a movement, and he spoke.

“Jeanne, will you not answer me; are you above?”

He looked in at the lower window, but he could see nothing; then he backed from the house, and called up to her bedroom window.

“Jeanne,” he cried, “speak to me from the window, and I will give you a message I have from Madame Boulotte. That will not alarm her,” he thought; “she will readily listen if she thinks I do not want to come in.”

He waited: then he called again—there was no sign of life. He went round to the back of the cottage; there too the door was fast, and the shutter of the little shed had not been taken down. Then, coming round again to the river side of the house, he

gathered up some pebbles and flung them against Jeanne's window. She might be sleeping, he thought. He waited, but there was no answer. Nothing to show any presence within the whitewashed, green-shuttered house, with its blue door and window jambs.

Vidonze looked round him. The place had always seemed lonely, but it never seemed so lonely as to-day. It was so still—not a sound except the splash of the river, and the creak in the dry branches of the trees beside the house. Suddenly an idea flashed on him. He hurried to the door and shook it with his utmost strength, but the strong lock held it back. He looked in again through the windows. These front shutters were often open; but it looked dark within. There was no trace of fire on the hearth.

Vidonze ground his teeth with baffled anger. Jeanne had fled—but whither? To whom could she have gone? He remem-

bered that the woman who had helped to nurse Madame Delimoy, Felix's mother, lived in the nearest village, and he hastened in search of her. He thought he should soon get the information he wanted from Felix, even if the boy's mother knew nothing of Jeanne's movements.

So he went along the road beyond the cottage; it soon left the river, and took its way between two lofty and steep hills. Soon he came to the few straggling huts, some beside the road, some a little way up the side of the *falaise*. These cottages called themselves the village of Segny, and Segny in spite of its small size owned a little, grey church, about a quarter of a mile further along the road.

Vidonze felt savagely impatient as he looked at these cottages, and felt that he did not know in which of them he should find the woman Rose. There was no one about to ask questions of. The village looked as deserted as the cottage by the

river had done. He rapped at the first door he came to, and after some delay an old man opened it. Vidonze knew his face at once; he was the old gravedigger of Segny; he had seen him yesterday in the churchyard.

“Do you know where Mademoiselle Lahaye has gone to?” It seemed to him that this man would probably know as much as Rose did.

The old man’s face beamed as he smiled. His old brown skin looked a network of black wrinkles. He had no teeth, and seemed to have lost his lips also, but what was left of these, mumbled together before his words sounded clearly.

“Yes, yes,” he said, in broad Walloon speech, “I know well. The beautiful Mam’zelle is where she was, at the cottage of the Meuse.”

He nodded his old head and smiled with pleasure at having as he thought helped the Monsieur to what he wanted.

“Old fool, you know nothing,” said

Vidonze, brutally. "Where does Rose, the mother of Felix, live?"

The poor old man's jaw dropped, all the glow went out of his cheery old face, and some of the wrinkles smoothed themselves. His head shook nervously as he answered, like a parrot :

"Yes, yes, Monsieur, Rose, the mother of Felix, lives next door but two;" but though he was cold he did not shut the door on his rude questioner, but stood waiting till he saw the woman at the next cottage open to answer Monsieur Vidonze's loud rap. Then the old man closed his own door gently, and crept back to his seat beside the hearth.

"Eugenie, my friend," he said, lovingly, to what seemed like a bundle of grey flannel on the opposite and most sheltered corner of the hearth, "that was a rude customer,—and he wants our Mam'zelle Jeanne. May the Lord," he crossed him-



self, "keep her safe from him now and hereafter!"

"Amen," said a feeble voice from the flannels; "there is no one so good as our Mam'zelle. May the Holy Virgin be her guide!"

Meanwhile, Antoine Vidonze had put the same question to the stolid mother of Felix.

"Mademoiselle has gone away," Rose said.

"I know that." He was more impatient than ever; it seemed to him Jeanne could not have gone far. He must hasten to overtake her. "When did she go? Where has she gone? Tell me quickly."

"I know nothing; Felix told me she had gone; that is all."

Vidonze looked keenly at the flat, meaningless face. "Just the face to hide a lie," he thought. He pulled out two francs and put them in her hand. "I forgot to pay Felix for his errand; is he in?" He

peered over her shoulder into the cottage.

The stolid face broke into a smile. She nodded as she looked at the money in her hand.

“No, Monsieur, he is not in, and he will perhaps not be in to-morrow. There is a fair near Givet to-morrow, Monsieur, and he has gone to drive Merette to the fair to be sold ; he has gone yesterday.”

Vidonze stood a minute thinking.

“Felix has not gone by himself to sell the cow ; you are not speaking the truth, woman.”

Rose had before seen Monsieur Vidonze’s anger ; when he had come to the cottage after Madame Delimoy’s death, and Jeanne had refused to admit him, he had stormed with anger as he stood outside. It did not disturb her unsensitive nature to see him angry now. She was a Fleming, dull and impassive, and besides, she had always been stupid and ugly, and so had not

met with any extra courtesy from men in her monotonous life.

“No, Monsieur, Felix did not go alone ; Monsieur le Curé has gone with him,” she said.

“Sure to be a meddling priest at the bottom of it, curse them all !” Vidonze muttered. “Near Givet you say ; what is the name of the place where the fair is held ?”

Rose shook her head with a vacant expression.

“Ah, Monsieur,” she said, simply, “I cannot tell you that for the best of all reasons, I have never heard it. ‘I am going along with Monsieur le Curé to sell Merette,’ Felix said, and he went, Monsieur.”

“And you expect him back to-morrow ?”

She looked at him with round, wondering eyes.

“I did not say that, did I, Monsieur ? Monsieur le Curé does not tell his arrangements to a poor woman like me ; I know

only that Felix has gone with Monsieur le Curé."

"At least they will know at the presbytery?"

Rose shook her head, and looked more stolid than ever.

"No Monsieur, there is no one there. Léontine, the housekeeper of Monsieur le Curé, has gone in his absence to see her mother, and I am keeping the key till she comes home—the presbytery is locked up."

Vidonze swore a loud oath.

"Confound all women and priests," he said; "they always hang together, but they shall not fool me. I will go to Givet too, and bring this Curé to a reckoning; he must know where Jeanne is, and no doubt he is selling Merette by her orders."

## CHAPTER XVI.

## A WEDDING.

MONSIEUR BACONFOY looked radiant; his massive, iron-grey hair had been made as smooth as its natural waviness would allow, and his dark eyes gleamed under their bushy, black brows with a mirth that was akin to mischief.

He had insisted on giving the wedding dinner; not at La Grue, which Edmond said would be too public, but in a room close by, and it was served at noon, so that there might be time for a drive for the wedding-party in two of his best carriages before the day grew dusk.

He sat at the dinner-table facing Ed-

mond and his bride ; Madame Boulotte was on his left hand. There were four other visitors, an old aunt of Monsieur Baconfoy, and three gentlemen acquaintances of Edmond Dupuis.

Pauline looked very sweet and bright, all the shy trouble had vanished from her glowing face. and she laughed merrily at Monsieur Baconfoy's jokes,

Edmond was graver than a bridegroom should be ; but now and then he fell into boisterous spirits, as if he made the effort against himself ; at least this was Madame Boulotte's conclusion as she looked tenderly at her friend.

It was by Pauline's wish that Edmond had sent the *lettre de faire part* to Madame Boulotte. He felt a secret unwillingness to spread the news of his approaching marriage ; but Madame Ferage was so friendless, and when she asked him if he had no female relation who could be with her he had no choice, for his only female

relations, except the old aunt, were in a foreign country. Madame Henroteaux had received the news of the engagement so coldly that poor Pauline felt she could not expect sympathy from her or from her fellow-gossips.

Edmond had got through the interval in busy excitement. He dared not let himself think—above all he never let his thoughts dwell on Jeanne. Madame Boulotte, in accepting the invitation, had shown her disapproval of the marriage by returning a formal answer, so that no word of Madame Delimoy's illness or death had reached Edmond Dupuis. He had tried to be with Pauline as much as possible, and usually she had power to soothe his disquiet, and he had had much to see to in getting the new home ready. He had taken a house in the outskirts of the city, with a pretty garden, and when they came back from their drive this afternoon, their new life would begin in this house, but for a

time only, for Edmond had told Pauline he wished to leave Namur.

But though Madame Boulotte had many a tender glance for Edmond, she was not wholly devoted to him. She had felt armed at all points to meet this sour, cynical cousin of his—"the fossil woman-hater," as she always called Monsieur Baconfoy. When she saw coming up the nave of the church, beside Edmond, this grand-looking, handsome man, pleasant-faced and smiling, in full-dress uniform—for he was Major of the National Guard, and had indeed been in his younger days a soldier of the Line—she felt puzzled and much disturbed. Her armour of defence seemed to have dropped off and left her, to her surprise, far more ready to attract this genial-looking cynic than to repel him. Still she thought he might be on his best behaviour to-day; no doubt his real character would show itself if she only watched for it and drew him out.

The dinner was a success, and they



had reached the stage of dessert, when in answer to some words from the bride, Baconfoy burst forth in praise of women.

“Some of them are angels, they are too good for this world,” he said, enthusiastically. There was a general laugh, for the young men present were well accustomed to his diatribes against the sex.

Madame Boulotte bridled. She thought this was a fair opening.

“You surprise me, Monsieur,” she said; “I have heard so much of your dislike to our sex, that I confess I can hardly credit such praise as this from you, you must have been maligned.”

She looked so fresh, so dainty and pleasant, her voice sounded so soft and equable, that Baconfoy felt as if he had been smoothly stroked down the back with a velvet paw.

“Yes, Madame,” he smiled roguishly, “I fear I have been maligned to you,

for I have been told you consider me a fossil."

Madame Boulotte's delicate pink cheeks grew rosy, and she gave a reproachful glance at Edmond, but he was bending down to speak, in a whisper, to Pauline.

The widow opened her eyes widely and looked as unconscious as she could.

"It is possible," she said sweetly, "that we have both been calumniated to one another. I have been told such terrible things about you;" she shook her head and her blue eyes looked pathetic.

Monsieur Baconfoy tried to keep a serious face—but it was too much for him—he burst out laughing.

Madame Boulotte pouted, then tried to frown, but the genial mirth in his dark eyes conquered, and she laughed in return, so heartily that tears came to her eyes.

Baconfoy filled her glass with champagne, and then his own.

"Madame," he bowed, "if you will

drink to the health of the 'fossil,' who knows he may not become human again?" Then seeing that the other guests were talking together, he whispered, with a glance at the young couple, who were still talking to each other, "it was not altogether the act of a fossil, I think, to bring those two together, and I believe I had a hand in it."

"I said you had." Madame Boulotte spoke emphatically, and she drew herself a little further away from her admiring neighbour.

Monsieur Baconfoy thought her charming; he quite understood her pettish movement, and that she resented the loss of his young cousin's devotion, for he supposed that Edmond had been devoted to this pleasant woman, as he had been to others, but it seemed to him that anyone who had been as handsome as Madame Boulotte had been, and still was, might expect attention from all men. The absence

of eagerness in her manner delighted him, but he did not quite believe in it, he wished to try if this arose from coldness or from practice.

“I am sure you think I have done well,” he continued, his eyes beaming mischievously, but his manner showed the stress he laid on her reply.

“How can I tell,” she said, “at my age?” she lowered her eyelids demurely, but her cheeks flushed; “one never judges by outside appearance.”

“You are right there, Madame.” Baconfoy was delighted to find that he could ruffle this perfect calm; “the only compensation one finds in increasing years is that they teach one the small value of outward seemings; one learns that beauty is but skin-deep, and therefore one no longer covets it. Is it not so?”

The flush on Madame Boulotte’s fair face had deepened into red, and her blue eyes were bright with indignation.

A fossil, indeed ! Edmund's cousin was far worse than a fossil, he had no behaviour at all.

But Monsieur Baconfoy sat with his head slightly on one side, listening for her answer.

“Monsieur,” she spoke in a very freezing tone, and looked steadily at him “it is quite impossible that one person's experience can resemble another's ; for my part, I am not conscious of having coveted that which I do not possess.”

Baconfoy clapped his huge hands and laughed so heartily that the bride and bridegroom roused from their low-voiced talk to listen, and the other guests turned their eyes on the genial host.

“What is it, Jules ?” Edmond said ; “you seem very merry, I hope it is not at our expense ?”

Madame Boulotte gave him a gracious smile.

“On the contrary, my dear friend,”

she said sweetly, "your cousin was only laughing at poor me."

"Ah, Madame, you will forgive me," but Baconfoy laughed again, with irrepressible enjoyment at her discomfiture. "I lay myself at your feet; if I laughed it was at the aptness of your rebuke, which I confess I deserved. I have the bad habit," he said, "of always trying to tease, and as to-day my friend opposite," he nodded at Edmond, "is safe from me, I have actually been guilty of teasing a lady; it is inconceivable, that I who have so profound an admiration for— for—" here he broke into a fresh peal of laughter and everyone joined, except Madame Boulotte, who only gave a little disdainful smile.

Before his cousin recovered himself, Edmond began to rebuke him.

"You are a nice fellow," he said, "to laugh at a lady; fie on you, I thought you knew better."

At this Jules began to laugh again, but Madame Boulotte said with smiling dignity:

“Monsieur Baconfoy is very amusing, my dear friend. Novelty is always amusing, and I cannot remember that anyone has ever laughed at me before to-day; is it a politeness you Namurois show to strangers?” she smiled sweetly, and with the patience of a martyr, on the gentlemen round the table.

At this all the men present began to abuse Baconfoy; they told him that he was a disgrace to his sex, and to the gallantry of the town of Namur.

He looked more sheepish than Edmond could have believed possible, as he bowed reverentially to Madame Boulotte.

“At least, Madame, you have the happiness of a triumph,” he said, “you have won all to your side, and must accept my homage, and repentance also;” then rising and again bowing he said, “May I be permitted to hand you to the carriage, which I

hear has just driven up?" Then he turned to the bride, and with a courtesy which surprised Madame Boulotte, he asked Pauline if she was ready to start for the drive he had planned. He then commended his aunt to the care of the visitors.

While Edmond placed his bride in the carriage, Baconfoy said to Madame Boulotte.

"How is your brother, Madame? he too, I fancy, is thinking of taking a wife."

"Yes, Monsieur, he tells me he intends to marry."

"Does the young lady live at Rimay?" persisted Baconfoy.

Edmond had been near them; at the last question he turned to Madame Boulotte, gave her a rapid, questioning look, and then he turned away.

The look thrilled through Madame Boulotte with sudden pain; she forgot her anger against Monsieur Baconfoy, all but her intense curiosity about Edmond. What if Antoine had been right, and this newly-



married man had really loved Jeanne Lahaye — then the best way was to give him the answer his look had asked for.

“No, Monsieur,” she looked at Baconfoy, as she said distinctly, “she does not live at Rimay, she is called Mademoiselle Jeanne Lahaye, she has lived till now in a cottage beside the Meuse, a few miles from Rimay, a lonely little place, but—”

“Ah,” said Baconfoy, “permit me to help you in, Madame.”

She was just going to tell him of the death of Madame Delimoy, but this interruption gave her time to reflect, and she was glad of it. It would have been most unlucky to talk of anything so sad at a wedding. Besides, if her suspicions were true, the less said about Jeanne the better for Edmond Dupuis. Madame Boulotte noticed that he got into the carriage last of all, and began to laugh and talk with the boisterous gaiety she had noticed at the beginning of dinner. This set her off

thinking, and she was unusually silent through the drive. It was possible Antoine had been right, and she had been wrong—she who was so seldom wrong. This sensation upset her, and she felt several years older than usual as she sat gazing at Pauline.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## BAFFLED.

ANTOINE VIDONZE had said nothing to his sister about Jeanne's sudden disappearance. He was sure he should soon find the girl, and then it need never be known that she had fled, for he felt sure she had gone away to escape from him. He told his sister carelessly when he returned that Mademoiselle Lahaye was going to stay with friends, and that she had better not pay her visit of condolence till he gave her notice of the girl's return.

"I did not know she had any friends," said Madame Boulotte.

"Yes, yes ; it is all right, and, if I am

satisfied, no one else need trouble his head about the matter. In the meantime, as I have to be absent myself a good deal on my affairs, I wish you would try to find me a clever manager—a woman able to carry on the business, and also to keep the house. I am quite satisfied about Jeanne.”

His sister thought he did not seem altogether satisfied, but she did not say so. She was just then absorbed by the idea of her wedding costume, and she quickly forgot her proposed visit to Jeanne Lahaye.

Vidonze stayed that night at Rimay. He determined to succeed in finding Jeanne, but at first it seemed as if he must wait till the Curé and Felix returned. The Curé might baffle him, but it must be his own fault if he did not get the truth from Felix.

Suddenly a clue came. He remembered that; after he left Jeanne's cottage on his last visit there, the doctor had overtaken him just before he reached Rimay, and

had said something about Jeanne's hasty summons. He remembered that at the time he had wondered who had been the summoner, for he had himself wakened Felix and taken him away before daylight. What a fool he had been not to suspect then that Jeanne had friends of whom he knew nothing ! With this new idea in his mind, he did not lose a moment ; he went straight to the doctor's house, but he was out. Vidonze looked keenly at the old woman who opened the door. She had a kindly face, and was garrulous in apologies for her master's absence. Vidonze led her into talk, and soon introduced the subject of Madame Delimoy.

The old woman's chin wagged sympathetically.

“ *Ma foi*—she went off quickly, we were just of an age,” she said ; “ who could have thought she would go so young ? ”

“ Your master did all he could to save her, I am sure of that,” said Vidonze ; and

then he added, so carelessly that his tone would have aroused the suspicion of a different listener, "do you remember who came for your master the day Madame Delimoy died?"

The old woman's smile broadened with the rare delight of feeling important.

"Oh, yes, Monsieur; I remember well, for such a lady as she that came I have not often seen. *Mon Dieu!* she was tall, and she spoke out as if she were a queen."

Vidonze felt strangely excited. He must find out all he could.

"Was this lady only passing through Rimay?" he asked.

The old woman's chin shook with her eagerness to impart her news.

"Dear heart, no," she said; "I wonder what Mam'zelle Pécasse would say if she heard you. She was as proud as a white hen that a real lady and gentleman had slept two nights at the 'Singe d'Or.'"

"They have left then?"

The old woman shrugged her shoulders, and gave him an inquisitive glance; his impatient tone had snapped the thread of her eagerness.

“Ah! Monsieur must find out for himself if he so much wishes to know. For me, I have my dinner to cook. I have told Monsieur all I know.”

Vidonze gave a sullen nod and turned along the one street of the town till he reached the “Singe d’Or.” If he had only known this two days ago, it would have been everything; now he feared he was too late. He scarcely felt disappointed when Mademoiselle Pécasse told him that the lady and gentleman had left two days ago for Givet. Vidonze thanked her, and then he walked away with his hands in his pockets, pondering his next move.

At last he decided to go to Givet. It was only a short journey, and perhaps he might kill two birds with one stone, for possibly he might at Givet meet the Curé

and the boy Felix. But disappointment followed him. He went to the best inn at Givet and asked to see the landlord; he learned that a lady and gentleman had arrived there two days ago from Rimay, but they had no luggage, and had only stayed an hour.

“Where did they go?”

“Ah! that is an impossible question,” said the inn-keeper. Further questioning elicited that they had walked away towards the railway station, but as they had no luggage they had gone as they had come—quietly, without attracting any special notice.

Vidonze broke into a volley of oaths. He told the innkeeper that he ought always to know where his guests came from and went to; that it was part of his duty to see that names were duly entered in his visitors' book; but the innkeeper, a burly, sallow man, with sly, twinkling eyes, told him with a laugh to



mind his own business, and left him standing on the mat in the entrance passage, while he went back into his den to finish an interrupted nap.

Vidonze returned to the railway-station, but he gained no news there. "So many people had been coming and going on account of the fair at Odinne," the station-master said, "no one could keep count of any special travellers. The fair? Oh, it had been a cattle-fair, and was over a day sooner than was expected; the beasts sold so well that people had gone, taking their bargains with them."

Vidonze ground his teeth in baffled anger. The Curé was his last hope, and he must seek him. It was not so very far to walk from Givet to the little village, and he soon set out on the cliff-bordered road. He had never loved Jeanne so passionately as now when she seemed for ever lost to him. What a thoughtless fool he had been to frighten the sweet girl into the

arms of these strangers, for he believed they were only chance acquaintances. Suppose, after all, she had not gone away, but was safe with Monsieur le Curé. In that case it behoved him to make a friend of the priest, and to be as courteous as possible.

It was a longer walk than he expected; but somehow Vidonze's impatience had subsided; and on the way the thought that Jeanne might after all be near at hand was soothing, and he made an earnest resolve that when he next saw her he would strive to be all she could wish. He could not understand his own rough conduct at their last meeting, and he called himself sundry hard names as he strode along the road. He had left the highway, and went along a narrow valley with steep wooded hills on either hand.

"I was mad with love, that is my excuse," he said; "no girl worth a sou will bear to be driven, and a spirit like Jeanne's

least of all. How divine she looked in her anger !”

And then he sighed. He would find Jeanne; he must find her, if he gave up years of his life to the search. It was a new phase in his life to be absorbed in the thought of another person, and he could not understand himself.

The narrow road followed the abrupt curves of the hills, so that every now and then they closed in at each end, and there seemed no outlet from the rocky prison, for between the trees huge grey boulders, sometimes mantled with ivy, projected forward over the road.

As Vidonze turned one of these sharp curves, he saw that he was no longer alone. A short distance before him walked a priest with slow steps and bent head. Vidonze looked intently—yes, it was the very man he was seeking; and Monsieur le Curé was walking along leisurely, reading his breviary as

he went, so he need not hurry to overtake him.

But Monsieur le Curé was not too much absorbed to hear footsteps coming behind him, and he turned round to confront his fellow-traveller.

He recognised Vidonze, and raised his broad-leaved hat in answer to his greeting. During Madame Delimoy's illness he had met the photographer more than once in the cottage beside the Meuse.

There was a vivid contrast in the faces of the two men, as they stood looking at one another for an instant before either spoke. Vidonze's height, and his broad muscular shoulders, made the priest look shorter than he really was; the bigger man's glowing beard looked more fiery than usual against the holland blouse he wore. His bronzed face was deeply red from walking through the crisp, keen air, and his large prominent eyes seemed to look out fiercely from among the tangled

red hair. The cold had made the Curé's mild face pale and pinched, his nose and his lips, too, were grey with cold, and his gentle blue eyes looked watery; but there was indescribable sweetness underlying this chilly aspect, and though the pair might have stood for a picture of the Wolf and the Lamb, yet the Lamb looked full of quiet dignity, and able to defend itself, unless indeed against physical force.

"You have come from Givet, Monsieur, as I have, is it not so?" Then as the priest nodded, Vidonze went on: "May I walk beside you? I have something to say. I intended to call at the presbytery, but this meeting will save me the trouble."

Monsieur le Curé, or Father Hallez as he was called by his flock, was an old-fashioned Catholic, and did not consider the Liberal portion of his village to be reprobates. He shook his head and looked grave when he heard of any very startling

political innovation; but he believed more in love and in the force of prayer than in compulsion, so that religious life went on far more tranquilly in his little village than it did in some of the larger towns beside the Meuse. But with all this toleration he had a keen insight into men and women, and the face of the red-bearded man who stood facing him would not have made him feel trustful of the photographer, even if this had been their first meeting, or if he had been ignorant of Vidonze's conduct in respect of Jeanne Lahaye.

He merely bowed, and resumed his walk along the lonely road; but he did not smile or say, "Willingly, Monsieur," though by nature he was extremely courteous.

Vidonze, however, was glad of his silence, it left him free to put his questions exactly as he chose.

"Monsieur," he said, "to come to the point at once, do you know where Mademoiselle Jeanne has gone to?"

Monsieur Hallez had been expecting this question, and had got the answer all ready.

"I do not know where Mademoiselle Lahaye is," he said.

"Pardon me," Vidonze said quickly, with a sneer; "I can hardly believe that you are entirely ignorant of her proceedings."

The Curé smiled; but he walked on in silence.

"I think, Monsieur, that you will feel that I have a right to question you." Vidonze spoke in an injured tone. "You are perhaps not aware that Mademoiselle Lahaye is my promised wife; before she died, Madame Delimoy gave her full consent to our marriage."

The Curé had kept his mild eyes fixed on Vidonze, and he saw he was speaking the truth.

"That may be, Monsieur; and yet it appears," he said slowly, "that

Madame Delimoy never spoke on the subject to her grand-daughter, and therefore the contract is incomplete, and cannot be held binding on Mademoiselle Lahaye."

"This is quibbling, Monsieur, and you know it." Vidonze's anger was rising, he felt as if he could strangle Jeanne's adviser, for what hope had he of reaching her through this adverse channel? "I ask you by whose means Jeanne left the cottage, and in whose charge she now is? You are bound to answer a civil question." He lowered his voice, and tried to look less angry.

Monsieur Hallez raised his head and looked at him steadily.

"I have only one answer to give you, Monsieur, and if you are wise you will give up your suit. Mademoiselle Lahaye does not wish to be your wife, and chiefly to avoid the pain of refusing you she has gone away to live with friends. You cannot, I think," he added smiling, "expect



me to give you the name of these friends, as by so doing I should entirely go against Mademoiselle Lahaye's wishes."

"Take care what you do." Vidonze spoke in a threatening voice. "You are acting illegally. I am the promised husband of Jeanne Lahaye, and you have aided and abetted a plan for taking her away from me, her natural protector."

Father Hallez shook his head, and quickened his pace.

"You had better answer me before it is too late," said Vidonze.

The Priest waved his thin hand to show that he considered discussion useless.

"I can only repeat my former answer. Mademoiselle Jeanne refuses to be your wife, and you have no writing to show on your part. In such a case a promise cannot be considered binding, one of the parties never having given consent thereto."

Vidonze shook his fist at the priest.

"You may live to be sorry for your

share in this piece of work," he said ; then, with an oath which scared the colour from the Curé's gentle face, "I was a fool to waste my time in talking to you ; as if anyone could hope to baffle the trickery of a priest."

Then he started off in a rage. He was as angry with himself as with the Curé. All his boasted self-possession and policy had failed him ; he had lost his temper like an irritable school-boy, just when he should have been most patient if he meant to circumvent this wily old man ; but there was still Félix ; it was not possible he could be such a fool as to be baffled by a child.

He soon left the priest far behind him ; striding on at such a pace that before long he reached the presbytery ; but he did not go to the house-door. On one side of the little square in front was a range of sheds. He guessed he should find Félix in one of these. Looking into the darkness

of the nearest shed he could not at first distinguish any object; but after a while he made out a cow, and a black mass crouched near her.

“Felix,” he called, “Felix;” but a snore came for reply. The boy was sound asleep.

Vidonze went into the dark, warm place, fragrant with the breath of the cow.

He bent down to look, for after all it might not be Felix.

“Felix,” he said, in a low, distinct voice, and the boy started at once awake.

“Yes, Mam’zelle Jeanne.” Felix jumped up rubbing his eyes.

“It is I, Monsieur Vidonze, *mon enfant*,” he laid, his hand on the boy’s arm to keep him in the stable, “what are you doing here, Felix?—you are at the presbytery.”

But the boy was now broad awake.

“Yes, Monsieur,” he said, “I am to live here, to take care of Merette.”

“But you took Merette to Givet to sell her, at Odinne?”

Felix shook his head and yawned, he had not had his sleep out.

"We did not take Merette, we took the cow of Monsieur le Curé," he said.

"Ah!" Vidonze slapped him on the shoulder, "you are taking care of her till Mademoiselle Jeanne comes back. Do you expect her soon, my Felix? eh," and though he could not distinguish clearly, Vidonze felt how stolid this boy looked. "Is Mam'zelle Jeanne coming home again?"

He thought his stolidity might be assumed. He had purposely brought with him a five franc piece; as he put this into the boy's hot hand he whispered,

"Look here, Felix, that is for you if you tell me where Mam'zelle Jeanne has gone to."

Felix felt the money tenderly with both hands, and put it secretly to his mouth to make sure that it was silver.

"I have not seen her," he said.

"You have not seen her, because she

has gone away, but you saw her go away, and you heard where she went to ; did you not, my boy ? ”

Felix left go of the money with one hand, and plunged this into his short, bristly hair.

“ I do not know,” he said.

“ If you have nothing to tell me I have nothing to pay you for. I thought a five franc piece was a nice thing to keep, but —give it up.”

The boy stood silent, but presently there came a sob, and then a howl of misery as he threw himself down among the dry ferns which made Merette’s bed.

Vidonze swore at him, and stooping dragged him up on his feet again.

“ Look here, little fool,” he said, “ and make less noise. I will keep this money till you tell me what has become of Mam’zelle Jeanne ; you know where I live, and, besides, I shall be here again to-morrow.”

Félix had been kindly treated both by

Jeanne and the Curé, but he loved money, and he had never possessed more than a few sous, which his mother had given him out of his wages, he felt crazy for the possession of that five franc piece, his fingers itched for it.

“I cannot tell,” he said, sullenly. “I know nothing. Mam’zelle Jeanne bade me go home to sleep at my mother’s, and when I came next morning she was gone.”

“But you saw her at Givet.”

“I did not go to Givet, I went to the fair, with the cow of the presbytery,” he began to sob afresh. He so longed to be able to tell Vidonze what he wanted to know. “Mam’zelle Jeanne was not at the fair.”

Vidonze stood musing, it seemed to him that Felix would tell him if he could, and he began to see that Jeanne had purposely sent this child out of the way.

“Listen,” he said, in a milder tone, “you are not to say you have seen me ; and there is a franc to keep your mouth shut

and your ears open ; if you listen and watch you will learn where Mam'zelle Jeanne is, and as soon as you bring me word you shall have this big coin I put in your hand just now. Is it a bargain ?”

“ Yes, Monsieur,” the boy spoke eagerly, “ I will find out what you want to know.”

“ Lie down now and go to sleep again, your master will be here directly, let him find you asleep.”

Vidonze found his way out quietly, so as to avoid the road by which he had come.

“ Little scoundrel !” he said to himself, “ he never troubles his head as to whether I mean harm or good to Jeanne, he only thinks of the money ; well, that makes him a surer tool.”

Meanwhile Monsieur Hallez came in by the front gate and went straight to the cow-stable.

“ Felix,” he called, and then looking in, the boy's snores told him how soundly he slept. “ Poor little fellow,” said the priest, the long journey has tired him out.”

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## PAULINE'S HOME.

IT was just a fortnight after the marriage of the widow and Edmond Dupuis. Edmond had gone out for the day—for the first time without Pauline—but he had gone to fulfil her wishes, and to tell the engineer with whom he had worked that he meant to abandon his profession. Pauline had been in such a transport of childish delight at his consent to this so much earlier than he had led her to hope for, that she rather hurried his departure.

“When he comes back,” she said to herself, “he will be quite my own, there will be nothing, not even business, to take him an instant away from me.”



She stood at the gate and watched him ride away with a smiling face, but when she came back into the house darkness seemed to have fallen over it. She went into the sitting-room, she had thought it charming when Edmond first showed it to her full of birds and flowers, now it looked desolate and uninteresting ; she felt already tired of it.

“ And he will be gone six hours, perhaps longer,” she murmured, “ Oh what shall I do, what shall I do without my darling ! ”

The first thing she did was to sink on the sofa, and burying her face among the cushions, she sobbed aloud.

But when her crying fit ended, Pauline felt ashamed of herself, she sat up, pushed the silky rings of dark hair out of her wet eyes and smiled.

“ What a baby I am ! I am quite silly,” she said, “ it is because he has never left me before ; but I must not be so selfish.”

But the first hour or two proved almost

unendurable, and Pauline had to strive hard against a second crying fit. She went into her husband's study. Before her marriage she had wished to surround Edmond with many little luxuries, but he had been almost ungracious in refusing her gifts. As she looked round and saw how bare the walls were, her eyes brightened and the gloom left her face. It was a pretty little room, looking on the garden, well papered and well furnished, but there was no luxurious superfluity about it, no splendid pipes, no pictures on the wall, and only two lounging chairs. In the house of her first husband Pauline had seen the surroundings of a man accustomed to self-indulgence in all ways, and she felt a pang of self-reproach even that two weeks had gone by and she had not carried out any of the plans she had made before marriage. She ran quickly to her room and rang for Valérie, who had come with her mistress to her new home.

“Give me my things, quick, Valérie, and get yourself ready too ; if we can be ready in five minutes we shall catch the train for Brussels.”

Valérie's red face paled suddenly, she put her hand on her heart, as if it pained her, and stared piteously at her mistress. Pauline laughed heartily and clapped her hands. No one who had known the dark-eyed, pensive little widow could have recognised this glowing ardent face now brimming over with happiness for the same Pauline.

“Make haste, make haste, Valérie, or we shall not get back in time,” and then the loving wife went to her desk and took out the rouleau of Leopolds which her husband had insisted on her keeping in her own possession, half of the sum which she had drawn out the day before her marriage.

“I forgot Edmond,” she said, blushing, “when I said I should never want money, I thought only of myself.”

She chinked a rouleau of Leopolds in her pretty little hand. One would have thought she was going to buy a house instead of a few luxuries.

Valérie was ready at last, and they started; the house lay nearer to the station than it did to the heart of the town, so that they had not far to go. They had just come in sight of the station when they met a tall woman, wrapped in a long cloak, with a thick veil over her face. As Pauline looked, she felt a thrill of recognition. It was scarcely a surprise when the woman stopped in front of her, and throwing up her veil showed the almost forgotten face of Mademoiselle Herkenne.

“I was going to your house.” She spoke coldly, while poor little Pauline changed colour quickly, and looked frightened. “I have important business to speak about.”

Pauline’s former tyrant had been watch-

ing her face, and she thought she saw submission there already. But it had only been a memory that had brought the look ; Pauline's new freedom snapped the sudden bondage that had held her as she remembered that she owed no duty to anyone but Edmond.

She smiled kindly at Mademoiselle Herkenne, and her freed senses took in at a glance the woe-begone poverty of her clothing.

"I must go now to the station, I have no time to spare," she said, "but we are coming back at seven ; if you will meet me here I shall have time to take you home and talk to you then. *Au revoir.*"

She tripped away with a bright smile before Mademoiselle Herkenne had recovered from her surprise at the change in her former pupil. There was no answering smile on her dark face. She stood still where Pauline had left her, and there was something like menace in her eyes. But the

anger she felt at being baffled was soon laid aside. The world had used Elise Herkenne hardly, and this usage had taught her to keep all her faculties alert, that she, too, might take advantage of others. She pondered deeply over the change in her pupil. She had not seen Pauline since her first marriage. She had been stung to fury on learning that "the little timid doll," as she called her, was to marry a rich man, and have at her command all that she herself had all her life coveted, while she was left to seek a new position in the plodding weariness of teaching. She looked at herself in the glass, and then she thought of Pauline's shy face and undeveloped figure, and took heart. If her little pupil had done so well, why should not she do well also and enjoy the bright side of life? She went from Malines to Brussels; but she soon found that a homeless young woman had little chance of marrying into the

position she coveted; even a shopkeeper would look for a portion with his wife. She had quickly spent her slender savings in dress; but she soon had admirers when she went to hear the band play in the park, under the guidance of her old landlady. The landlady was kind, and greatly admired her stylish lodger. She told her with such a figure she would make a fortune on the stage, but Elise was bent on making a good marriage, and she did not think the stage would help her to this unless she had a real talent for acting. Early in life she had loved passionately—and, as she thought, well; she had been basely deceived, and thrust out into the world to do the best she could there. She remembered her lover only to hate him. He might be dead, she thought, but at least he should not recognise her as an actress. If she ever saw him again it should be in a position so superior to his own that he would be afraid to approach her.

Time went on, and then all at once her landlady, a miser at heart, began to press for her rent, and not only for rent, but for money advanced to the incautious Elise. At last she began to threaten, and told her lodger she could have money if she choose to accept it. Elise knew this well, but she still hoped to live honourably; her debts increased and her means diminished—but there is no use going into the details of a woman's ruin. Elise paid her debts, and had lived in outward splendour till a few months before she met with Madame Dupuis. Then she sank into poverty again, fell ill, and was nursed at the hospital of Namur. During her recovery she heard some one talking of the marriage of the rich young widow, Madame Ferage and the handsome Monsieur Dupuis. This seemed to offer a refuge from starvation. Only to-day she had got her discharge, and immediately she sought



out her old pupil. She was faint with fatigue, and when she met Pauline her head was dizzy with the stir around her. Now she stood thinking—she had not more than a couple of francs in the world, and that little heartless puss had bade her wait her pleasure till seven o'clock. What could have so changed the child?

“It is money,” the wretched woman said; “she was a soulless little being, without a thought of anything. The only happiness offered her when she married Monsieur Ferage was money, and she could not have known even how to spend it—little fool!” She paused, and went on thinking. “It has given her self-possession, however,” she said, “and I suppose I must submit to her patronage. All fools patronise. Wealthy fools, especially, always rate coin above all other advantages.” She smiled bitterly. “Well, do we not all set the highest value on that which we possess? does not the singer think a good voice the grandest of

gifts? does not the beauty consider a beauty queen among women? and wealth is more powerful than beauty or music. I will let the child play Lady Bountiful if she likes, but I will rule her, too."

She felt faint with hunger, but she would not spend her two francs. She had had plenty of time during her long illness to resolve on prudence in her future life, and now she seated herself on the low stone wall beside the river to plan her behaviour to Pauline. She remembered how kind the child had always been to animals and birds. It was not likely she would be sent hungry from her door. At first she thought she would try to get installed as housekeeper and companion to Madame Dupuis, but this idea was soon dismissed. She knew nothing of her husband, who might have friends in Brussels, and these friends might at any moment find out her past history. No, she would not become actually dependent on Pauline, but she

would make her find some position where she could live comfortably, and yet where her antecedents need not be strictly looked into.

“ Rich people are always believed,” she said bitterly ; “ with her handsome clothes and her pretty smile, the little fool is as good a reference as I could have.”

But she had sorely taxed her strength of endurance ; sometimes she walked up and down, but her steps grew slower and feebler ; when at last she saw Pauline and her maid drive out of the station, she could scarcely draw one foot after the other. As the carriage passed her Elise saw that it was full of large parcels ; Pauline kissed her hand to her, and then as she saw how pale Mademoiselle Herkenne was, she called to the driver to stop.

“ You must get out, Valérie,” she said, “ there is only room for one, and poor Mademoiselle Elise looks ready to faint.”

Valérie was tired, and she scowled as she made room for the ex-governess.

## CHAPTER XIX.

## AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

PAULINE felt a little frightened as she welcomed her visitor and followed her into the house. She consulted Edmond about everything, and here she was actually bringing a visitor home, an entire stranger to him. But Mademoiselle Herkenne soon made her forget her uneasiness.

She glanced rapidly round Pauline's sitting-room, and began to admire it, then she walked up to a small table and fixed her eyes on a photograph that seemed to be enshrined there, with a bouquet of spring flowers before it.

"What a handsome face!" Elise said,

“is this really Monsieur Dupuis?” Then answered by Pauline’s radiant smile, “You are, indeed, a happy woman, my Pauline,” she said, “that face is full of noble and tender thoughts, and I suppose this husband worships you, eh? Is he at home?”

She had darted a quick glance at the young wife while she pretended to examine the portrait more closely, and she saw that Pauline blushed.

“Is he not handsome? but I cannot tell you how good he is,” the girl said; “is it not wonderful that he should have married me?”

Mademoiselle Herkenne smiled.

“Well, no, that does not seem so very wonderful; you were a charming young widow, and rich besides. I only wonder you were left single for two years.”

Pauline looked at her steadily.

“I was not likely to see anyone during my term of mourning.”

She spoke with a pretty little assumption of dignity, which became her, Mademoiselle Herkenne thought; but all at once the stern self-repression she had exerted relaxed, the room went round with her and she caught at the wall near her for support.

Pauline had never seen anyone turn so ghastly white, and she shrieked with terror and called "Valérie."

She was too frightened to offer any help, for it seemed to her that Mademoiselle Elise was dying.

Valérie came in, but she was not pitiful; she thought that her mistress had acted imprudently. She had never liked Mademoiselle Herkenne, and here was the woman fainting, and perhaps about to be laid up in the house. However she helped the visitor to an easy chair, and got water and flung some in the set white face.

"Get a glass of wine," said Pauline, and then, seeing that Mademoiselle Herkenne looked less death-like, she went

to her and began to chafe her cold hands.

This had a quickly reviving effect ; perhaps the action carried an assurance of succour to the forlorn woman ; something between a sigh and a sob escaped her, and she pressed the little hands that were rubbing hers.

“ A morsel of bread,” she whispered, “ before I taste the wine. I fear to take it alone.”

There was such a hungry look in her eyes that Pauline felt shocked and alarmed. She was more than ever sorry for her old governess, but she hoped Mademoiselle Herkenne would go away before Edmond returned.

While Valérie brought biscuits and wine, Pauline wondered whether she might venture to question her visitor. But she might have spared herself the doubt.

Elise Herkenne ate and drank all that had been placed before her, and then she turned to Pauline.

“ I consider you an old friend, my dear child, and I shall treat you as one. Will it weary you if I tell you the strait in which I find myself?”

She saw that the girl was looking at the pretty little clock, and her quick-witted intuition told her that she had best be brief. She went on without waiting for an answer.

“ I have had a long illness and I have spent all my savings ; can you help me towards earning my living ? I have not even the means of taking a lodging.”

Pauline was greatly troubled, her tender heart told her that she ought to shelter this poor friend under her own roof, and yet she dared not venture on such a bold step.

Mademoiselle Herkenne was reading her face while she hesitated.

“ I could not stay here with you, dear, even if you were kind enough to take me in. I am too proud to make Monsieur Dupuis’,



acquaintance till I can dress more like a lady. If you will only find me employment you will do me a real service. I want to be companion or housekeeper, and I do not ask for high wages ;” she said this scornfully, and her manner impressed Pauline in the way she intended.

How absurd it seemed to hear this proud, accomplished woman talk of taking wages.

“You must not talk so,” the girl said, eagerly, “we will soon find you a nice home, and meantime, dear Mademoiselle,” she whispered, and grew rosy with shame, “you will let me be your banker.” She had been feeling in her pocket, and she slipped some of the Leopolds she had left there into her visitor’s willing hand.

“You are very kind,” said Mademoiselle Herkenne, with so much dignity that Pauline felt guilty, and altogether as if she were once more in the school-room at Malines. “This is a loan, Pauline ; a very kind one, which you will help me to repay

by finding me employment. I will leave you now, for I shrink from meeting your husband; he might think you were harbouring a beggar."

"He would be glad to see you;" but Pauline could not say the words heartily. She knew that Edmond would not grudge any kindness shown to her old governess; but she did not wish him to see Mademoiselle Herkenne while she looked so forlorn and shabby.

"Where shall you go?" she said, as her visitor bent down and kissed her on both cheeks—"you will let me have your address?"

"You shall hear from me as soon as I am suitably lodged and clothed. I regret that I entered your house in this condition." She wrapped her long cloak closely round her and pulled down her veil, then nodding, she added, "Do not fear, I will not prove troublesome or a disgrace to you, you good child. *Au revoir.*"

Pauline looked after her with timid admiration; but she felt most heartily relieved that there was no chance of a meeting between her shabby visitor and her husband.

## CHAPTER XX.

MONSIEUR BACONFOY CALLS ON MADAME  
BOULOTTE.

MONSIEUR BACONFOY had been a successful man, so far as regarded getting on in life, and people said this success had largely arisen from his wonderful consistency. He had always been upright and single-minded; a good master, a just magistrate, for he was one of the *echevins* of Namur, a liberal host—a man who never made professions or paid compliments; but one who was a true friend to rich and poor alike, and whose good deeds far outnumbered the cynical utterances ascribed to him. But lately the

gossips—for in Namur at the date of the marriage of Edmond Dupuis everyone knew the business of everyone else—had received a shock amid the joy with which they welcomed such a fresh supply of food. It had transpired that Monsieur Baconfoy, who had not been known for years to indulge himself with a holiday, had paid two visits to a place called Rimay, a little out-of-the-way town on the Meuse, where no one ever went except for business, and hardly ever for that.

“Of course it is possible that Monsieur Baconfoy has gone there for business; but it is a very strange coincidence—very strange indeed,” Madame Henroteaux said, over a cup of confidential coffee, to her friend of the moment, “that he should go to see the lady who so strangely superseded all Madame Ferage’s best friends at the wedding, that widow-woman, you know, who lives at Rimay.”

She was an intriguing widow, too,

Madame Henroteaux had heard, who took in young men as lodgers in the hope of finding a second husband among them; in fact, matters had gone so far between her and Edmond Dupuis—so Madame Henroteaux was given to understand—that it had been deemed a measure of policy to conciliate her by asking her to the marriage, lest she should open her mouth too freely. It was sad, Madame Henroteaux went on to say, and it was very inconsistent, that such a man as the landlord of the Hôtel la Grue, who had gone to the verge of rudeness in his behaviour to women in general, should have singled out such a poor specimen of her sex to visit. They had no proof, but of course he went to Rimay to see Madame Boulotte.

A mother with seven unattractive, unmarriageable daughters may be excused some uncharitable imaginings in such a case; but for once gossip was

not unfounded, and came something near the truth.

Monsieur Baconfoy had gone on for years taking such amusement as came in his way, he really derived much of that inward peace which so helps towards an outwardly contented demeanour, from a comfortable sense of the superiority of his own judgment to that of others ; this being inevitable and not to be blamed in him, seeing the vast consideration in which he was held by his neighbours. This serenity had at Edmond Dupuis' wedding received a blow. Madame Boulotte had disagreed with him in words ; but that in itself was a light matter ; but there had been something impressive about her, and he had seen in her eyes that look of subdued reproof, and of superior wisdom which seemed to say : " Go on in your ignorance and conceit, oh, foolish man, you will have at last to come to me for true wisdom."

We all know this pitying expression,

which is intended solely for our benefit, and has usually the effect of making us restive and self-assertive, but in Madame Boulotte's case there had been extenuating accompaniments. She had not only looked very handsome, according to Monsieur Baconfoy's taste, but she had also looked as if she thought him very good-looking. They had differed and disputed, she always getting so much the best of the arguments that he had felt greatly tickled between amusement at her audacity and a certain desire to conquer her contradiction. It seemed to him that here was a woman worth convincing, a woman of sense and judgment, not a mere doll with a certain number of speeches, which, like dresses, she had got from others and kept ready for use, and would use till they were worn out, and then, probably, seeing that talk could not be bought as a new gown could, would have nothing to say at all; no, Madame Boulotte was original.



Monsieur Baconfoy thought over these things. He grew restless and discontented; and about a month after the marriage, he went over to Rimay. Madame Boulotte had asked him to call upon her if he ever came into her neighbourhood. So he presented himself at her house, and found her at home. She made his visit pleasant, though as her brother was present during the interview, and was in a very sulky mood, the talk was not so bright as Baconfoy had expected. It had been chiefly occupied by Vidonze's complaints of the stupidity of the housekeeper his sister had obtained for him, and he had to return to Namur in a somewhat dissatisfied mood. However, he promised himself a better chance next time.

When the bright weather came, and the birds were singing in every tree, the flowers opening their sweet eyes here and there among the limestone crags beside the Meuse—the gay river itself no longer

ice-bound, but sparkling in merry ripples in the sunshine, Monsieur Baconfoy had, through the intervention of Madame Dupuis, found a clever housekeeper for Vidonze, a perfect treasure of usefulness, and now he tempted his fate, and travelling to Rimay he again presented himself at the door of Madame Boulotte on the pretext of inquiring whether she was satisfied with his recommendation. Madame Boulotte received him graciously, and he thought she looked handsomer than ever. He asked if her brother was at home.

“Antoine is away, but I do not know where he is, and his housekeeper to whom I have written cannot tell me,” she said, and Baconfoy heaved a sigh of relief. The fair widow told the story of her brother’s disappearance, and in the course of this story there came naturally the mention of Jeanne Lahaye.

“My brother had an idea, a very foolish idea,” said Madame Boulotte, “that Jeanne

cared for your cousin Edmond ; but as I told him, Monsieur Dupuis had no thought of Jeanne, he used to row down to Madame Delimoy's cottage for the sake of exercise."

"Did he go often?" asked Baconfoy.

A sudden gloom fell on him. He had not forgotten Dupuis' mysterious sadness just before his engagement to Madame Ferage. He had had strong suspicions about Jeanne. He remembered many little things which he had thought trivial then, and it seemed most likely that Vidonze had been right in his "foolish idea."

"He went two or three times a week, and on Sundays always," said Madame Boulotte.

"And you went with him sometimes, Madame; it must have been charming for him," said Baconfoy, enviously.

"No, oh no; I——" Madame Boulotte hesitated, for she remembered that Edmond had never asked for her company in his boat, "I am not fond of the water, unless, indeed, on a steamer."

“Is this girl pretty?” he asked.

Madame Boulotte shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

“It is the very strangest thing,” she said, “I have looked at Jeanne again and again. She is a tall, well-grown girl, with a frank, bright face, but the idea of beauty never came into my head in connection with her, and yet Antoine says Jeanne is perfectly beautiful. However, he has strange taste. He raves about that house-keeper you found for him, and really she is not good-looking.”

“I have never seen her,” he said; “I took her on trust from Madame Dupuis.”

Monsieur Baconfoy sat thinking. At last he said :

“Do you think this Jeanne is fond of your brother?”

Madame Boulotte’s nose wrinkled with the peculiar expression it wore when she was thwarted.

“Well, no, I think not; Antoine seemed

troubled by her coldness, and I have been told the girl went away to avoid him ; that seems hardly likely ; but certainly Antoine told me that it would be everything for him if he could make Jeanne believe in Edmond's marriage, and now he says he must keep on a housekeeper as he is not likely to marry at present. But it is absurd to suppose that Jeanne has refused Antoine."

"Why is it absurd, Madame, if I may be permitted the question?"

Madame Boulotte felt perplexed. The situation was embarrassing. It would have been easy to say that as she had been Edmond's friend and confidant he would certainly have spoken to her of his love for Jeanne Lahaye if there had been any love between these two. But, she scarcely knew why, she did not wish to dwell upon her own extreme intimacy with Monsieur Baconfoy's cousin.

"Oh," she said, indifferently, "Jeanne

Lahaye has no money. Edmond could never have thought of her, and she was too well brought up to care for him unless he asked her."

Monsieur Baconfoy looked sarcastic.

"Madame," he said, politely, "you are more cynical than I am said to be. I can quite fancy that two young fools may put love before money."

Madame Boulotte turned on him sharply.

"What do you mean, Monsieur?" she said, "I thought Monsieur Dupuis had made a love-marriage."

Baconfoy leaned back in his chair and gave vent to one of his low tormenting laughs.

"Heaven forbid that it should be anything else, my dear Madame. We all know that love is the great sweetening of marriage, but do you allow a man only one love in a life-time. Bah! my cousin may have flirted with the beautiful Jeanne, but then he had not seen his lovely Pau-

line. I give you my word, Madame, Edmond and his sweet bride remind me of a pair of cooing turtle doves."

Madame Boulotte sat stiffly upright, and looked like an-offended Juno.

"Bon, Monsieur; that is then your candid and deliberate opinion of the use of our sex, and of the position woman holds in the lives of men. We are in your eyes only a pastime no longer desired, or remembered even, when place and circumstances change. I have a better opinion of your cousin, Monsieur, than to suppose that he could change so easily, his heart is not made of such elastic material as you suppose."

Her voice trembled as if tears were kept back by a strong effort, and Baconfoy felt uneasy.

"Ah, Madame, forgive me if I have said anything to displease you. I have an awkward way of putting things. I have never seen this Mademoiselle Jeanne, I

cannot tell whether she is a person likely to inspire a *grande passion* or not. I must confess," he looked slyly at the widow, "I am not an admirer of unfledged charms, and so I suppose I forgot that they may be attractive to others. But do you not think, Madame, that it might be jealousy on the part of your brother that prompted him to say what you have told me?"

A faint blush had risen on the widow's cheeks, and she no longer sat stiffly upright, her combativeness was quelled.

"I will tell you what my brother said, and then you may judge for yourself, Monsieur. Antoine wished to have my letter of invitation to the wedding, so that he might show it to Jeanne Lahaye; he said there would be no chance of her listening to him unless she had proof of the marriage of Edmond Dupuis."

Monsieur Baconfoy did not answer, he lay back in his chair thinking. In his youth he had loved, and his love had proved



false, and since then he had gone on through life hardening himself against all women; with an ever-present sadness in his eyes which no one understood. For how many years had he treasured the memory of his false fair love! He wondered, if Edmond had really forgotten Jeanne Lahaye, how would it be when they met again? Now that he saw more of Pauline, it seemed to him that life must be sometimes dull with her, pretty and loving as she was.

“Madame,” the look of surprise in Madame Boulotte’s eyes made him aware of his inattention, “I beg your pardon, but your words set me thinking. May I ask you what Mademoiselle Jeanne said when your brother showed her this invitation to Edmond’s wedding.”

“That is just what I do not know,” there was a vexed tone in her voice, “in fact, I am not sure that she ever saw it. When Antoine came back he evaded my

question on one pretence and another ; and not long after he went away. But, Monsieur, I went to the cottage and finding it closed I drove on to the village and made inquiries, and I have every reason to suppose that Antoine never had the chance of seeing Jeanne again. I was told she left her home the day after her grandmother's funeral—it is impossible to speak to my brother about her—or even to write to him for I do not know where he is.

“ And you do not know where the girl is gone, perhaps he has followed her.”

Madame Boulotte pursed up her lips mysteriously.

“ I promised Monsieur Hallez I would not gossip, but I am sure that my brother does not know where Jeanne is, I fear he is wasting his time in seeking for her—but that is quite another matter—willingly I do not think she would be his wife.”

Baconfoy gave a low whistle.

“ I hope she will stay away,” he said,

gravely, "regrets are always bad things, and it is possible that Mam'zelle Jeanne Lahaye may be a regret of my cousin Edmond's. For his sake I hope she will keep away from this part of the country."

Madame Boulotte laughed incredulously, "You seem to forget one thing, Monsieur," she said, "is it not quite possible that your cousin may know nothing of Jeanne's preference for him if it exists, and that she, when the news of his marriage reaches her ears, will at once resign herself to circumstances. She will come back to the cottage, and she will forget she ever refused Antoine; and who knows but she will marry him. And we must also forget that she ever was so indiscreet as to care for a man who did not want to marry her; that is to say if she ever did care for Edmond."

"Madame, you are an oracle," and Baconfoy bowed with a cynical smile, "I doubt not all will come to pass as you say," But in his heart he felt troubled for

Edmond's happiness. He remembered that Madame Boulotte had begun by saying Jeanne would not give her love unsought, and he resolved to pay a visit to his cousin as soon as he returned to Namur. "Then, Madame," he said, "I may tell Madame Dupuis that her *protégée* has turned out a prize. She was, it seems, Pauline's governess in her youth, but illness and trouble have robbed her of her strength and skill in teaching. She prefers a humbler and more lucrative employment; your brother I hear has been very liberal to her."

Madame Boulotte smiled.

"Yes, for the moment she is a perfect fad of Antoine's, he says she is full of ideas—she is enterprising as well as ingenious—by her advice he talks of extending his business, and of opening an establishment at Spa or some other summer resort."

Baconfoy laughed.

"Who knows, Madame—perhaps this Mademoiselle Herkenne may settle him

altogether, and put Mademoiselle Jeanne out of his thoughts, ‘ a bird in the hand ’ you know.” He looked teasingly at the widow.

Madame Boulotte again stiffened herself.

“ No, Monsieur ;” she said haughtily, “ my brother is eccentric and unsettled, but he is my brother, and in our family we do not marry those in our employment.” Then conscious that she had been betrayed into unusual vehemence. “ There is no chance of that,” she said gently, “ she is much older than Antoine, and is wholly wrapped up in her business, she is as hard and cold as—as a man is. No, unless I am mistaken, Mademoiselle Herkenne has lived her life already, she only troubles herself about her daily bread.”

Baconfoy smiled ; he could not see the force of Madame Boulotte’s logic ; but as he did not wish his last words to be a contradiction, he looked at her with tender reproach.

“ ‘Hard and cold as a man;’ Madame, is not that a cruel verdict? The pine-apple has a rougher skin, and yet it has a more intense flavour than the rosy, downy peach, is it not so? You have taught me to believe that you see below the surface.”

He had risen, and he heaved a real sigh from his capacious chest as he stood before her.

She gave a quick glance to see if he were in earnest, and then a bright flush flew into her face and her lips quivered.

“Thank you, Monsieur, I ought to have said there are exceptions; but then,” so sweet a smile curved her handsome mouth that it took all platitude from her words, “are not those to whom one speaks always the exceptions?”

Baconfoy bent down and kissed her dimpled hand; then feeling he was on dangerous ground, he took a reverential farewell, claiming leave soon to repeat his visit.

## CHAPTER XXI.

MONSIEUR BACONFOY GOSSIPS.

THE year looks bright and pleasant. Edmond and his wife have made their garden fragrant and gay with flowers ; but Edmond's work near Namur is ended for the present, and Pauline urges him to give up his profession and travel. This has been the wish of his heart for years past. He has some idea of painting, and has always longed to be an artist, and Pauline thinks what a loss the world will sustain if such a genius as Edmond's ties itself down to a mere mechanical occupation, instead of soaring into a congenial atmosphere. So that the young couple have almost decided

when summer comes to take a southern flight, and perhaps to leave Namur altogether.

They were planning this when Monsieur Baconfoy was announced, and Pauline eagerly began to unfold their plans to him.

“Why wait for summer?” he said, “we are having better weather now than we often have in summer, and the country looks lovely. I have just come back from the country.”

“Where have you been?” said Edmond, “I did not know you had left Namur.”

Baconfoy gave one of his genial, hearty laughs, and glanced from his cousin to Madame Dupuis, who looked exquisitely pretty dressed in white, as she sat leaning back in a low chair near the window.

“*Ma foi!* you two are so wrapped up in one another,” he said, “that a poor insignificant atom like me takes no place in your lives. I have been away a week.”

“Tell us where you have been.” Pauline



smiled, and then shaking her head at her husband; "Is it really so long since you went to see our good cousin?" she said.

Edmond had turned away as his cousin spoke; he was busily searching through a portfolio, bending so low that his face was hidden.

"Where have you been?" he said, without looking up.

Pauline's eyes, however, were fixed on Monsieur Baconfoy while she waited for his answer, and to her surprise she saw a flush rise on his face while his eyes had an embarrassed expression.

"I went to Rimay," he looked towards Edmond, "I—I had business there."

Edmond raised himself suddenly, and then, as if he resisted an impulse, bent down again over the portfolio. Baconfoy noticed the movement; but Pauline was sitting with her back to her husband.

"To Rimay!" then she said playfully, "I hope you went to make your peace with

Madame Boulotte ; she told me you were a fine creature, spoiled by false ideas."

Baconfoy threw his head back and laughed.

"I like that," he said. "Of course I went to see Madame Boulotte, and I can return her compliments; she is undoubtedly a fine creature."

Edmond looked up at his cousin with an amused face.

"No, no, Jules," he said, "I cannot allow you to admire Madame Boulotte; you used to call her very hard names, if I remember rightly, and not so long ago either."

Baconfoy's broad face had become almost purple.

"Well, well," he said, laughing, "I suppose we all make mistakes, and I certainly was wrong if I said that Madame Boulotte was anything but a charming woman. You see," he said, as if his change of opinion needed excuse, "this

was not my first visit to Rimay, and I have had time to learn that a woman is different in her own house and shows to much greater advantage there."

Pauline's eyes beamed with delight.

"Dear cousin Jules," she said, mischievously, "do you not think she would show to still greater advantage at the Hôtel la Grue—how nice it would be if you brought her there."

Baconfoy shook his head.

"I thank you, my pretty cousin; but I am not fitted for the bird-cage state of existence. You two are such a pair of lovers"—he looked at Edmond, but he had again turned away—"that you fancy everyone else would be happier in living your life; but I prefer my pipe and my liberty."

"Then you have no right to go to Rimay; you are—who knows—stealing poor Madame Boulotte's heart from her without any intention of giving your own in exchange. Ah, it is a cruel game, my

cousin." She had begun mockingly, but as she ended there was a pathetic ring in her voice that struck Baconfoy, and checked his laughter.

"Well," he looked keenly at her, "I do not think you need fidget yourself about Madame Boulotte, it seems to me I am not the first admirer she has had, and has, by many, and I am far too modest to suppose I am the most attractive among them; but I must be going—can I do any communications for you in Namur, my fair cousin?" he shook her hand warmly, "you seem so far away from us here."

"I am coming with you," said Edmond; he closed the portfolio and came forward, "I have been wanting to say all sorts of things, but you and Pauline have managed to keep all the talk to yourselves."

"Stay," said Baconfoy, "I must tell you cousin Pauline that Monsieur Vidonze finds your protégée all he could wish." Pauline clapped her hands, "I am so very

glad," she said, "I was so very anxious about poor Mademoiselle Herkenne."

The pretty little white villa with its climbing roses and cool, large leaved creepers lay beside the Meuse; but the cousins after a while left the road beside the river, and took a turning which soon led them into the town; they crossed a broad street with pretty shop windows on each side, and the aspect of bright freshness—that special characteristic of Belgian cities. Monsieur Baconfoy's hat seemed to have a hard time of it, judging by its perpetual movement off and on his head, as each moment he encountered some acquaintance or friend. Now a *diligence* came clattering along, bells tinkling, whip cracking, and passed them where the street widened at its juncture with another; on the right with a few trees in front of it was the entrance to the courtyard of the Hôtel la Grue, and the *diligence* had just set down a passenger there.

The courtyard was full of light; sunshine streamed through a glass roof overhead, up the white walls the graceful climbing plants were in full beauty, while tall palms and ferns filled the corners with their picturesque fronds, and made a background for brilliant pot flowers.

"Coming in, my boy? that is good to see," Baconfoy rubbed his hands joyfully, as Edmond turned into the courtyard, "like old times; come into the bureau, we shall be quieter."

He went into a low room beyond the pretty open air parlour on the right.

Edmond hesitated, he did not quite know to what he might have to listen, and he wished to be free to go away as suddenly as he chose.

But Baconfoy was choosing him one of his best cigars, and presently he came to the door of the bureau with it in his hand.

"Come along in, Edmond," he said, "I

have a budget of Rimay news for you, and we shall be quieter in here."

Edmond went in silently and against his will; he wished he had not come out with Jules. He wished too that his cousin had stayed at home at Namur. By some subtle magic the news of this journey to Rimay had disturbed the quiet tenor of Edmond's life; he was growing used to a sort of passive happiness, and now, at the words "news from Rimay," this content, it was scarcely happiness, suddenly shrivelled up like a night blossom at the approach of daylight. But he felt that his cynical cousin's eyes were upon him.

"Well, how are all the good people of Rimay?" he said carelessly, "to begin with, how is Madame Boulotte?"

Baconfoy puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"She is quite well, I said so—handsomer than ever."

"You still think her handsome then?"

"*Ma foi*, what else can I think? I

suppose no one can deny it. She is, however, a little anxious about her brother," he blew away the smoke of his cigar and looked sharply at Dupuis.

"What is the matter?" Edmond still spoke indifferently.

"Well, no one knows what has become of the fellow. He was with his sister, doing nothing seemingly, then he came here and engaged his housekeeper; and then all at once he disappeared. Madame Boulotte thought he had gone back to Namur, but all the letters she wrote to him have been sent back by Mademoiselle Herkenne, and Madame can get no tidings."

Edmond smoked on in silence.

"He was always a vagabond," he said at last, "but I thought—I fancied—" he stopped abruptly.

"You thought he was going to marry? Yes, Madame Boulotte says a marriage had been arranged by Madame Delimoy



before her death between Vidonze and Mademoiselle Lahaye."

Edmond took his cigar from his lips and stared at his cousin.

"Do you mean, Jules, that my old friend Madame Delimoy is dead, and that no one has told me of it?" Edmond stood in a sort of dream, at that moment he felt that Madame Delimoy had been a part of the sweet bright life of those happy months beside the Meuse. "What then has become of—of Jeanne?" He had not said the name for months, and it cost him an effort to say it.

"Ah! there is the mystery. When Madame Boulotte wished to call on Mademoiselle Jeanne after the funeral, Vidonze said she had gone to some friends, and he would give his sister notice of her return: so when Vidonze disappeared too, Madame Boulotte drove out to call on her promised sister-in-law, thinking she might hear tidings of Antoine, and she found the

cottage beside the river deserted ; and she learned that Mademoiselle Jeanne had never come back, and that no one knew where she was."

Edmond flung down his cigar and started up.

"Vidonze has done this. Don't you see that he has managed it all," he said impatiently. "What has the villain done with her ? Do you mean to tell me, Jules, that a girl has disappeared in this way and no one has stirred a step to find her?"

Baconfoy left off smoking and indulged himself in a laugh ; not for long, however ; his young cousin's face looked threatening.

"I see marriage has not calmed your impulsiveness, cousin. I fancy all has been done that can be done, but only time can solve the mystery. A few days after her discovery, Madame Boulotte met the priest, Monsieur Hallez, who she thought was in Mam'zelle Jeanne's confidence, and

questioned him; he said the young lady was safe, and that she had gone away to avoid Antoine Vidonze, but he declined to give any further explanation."

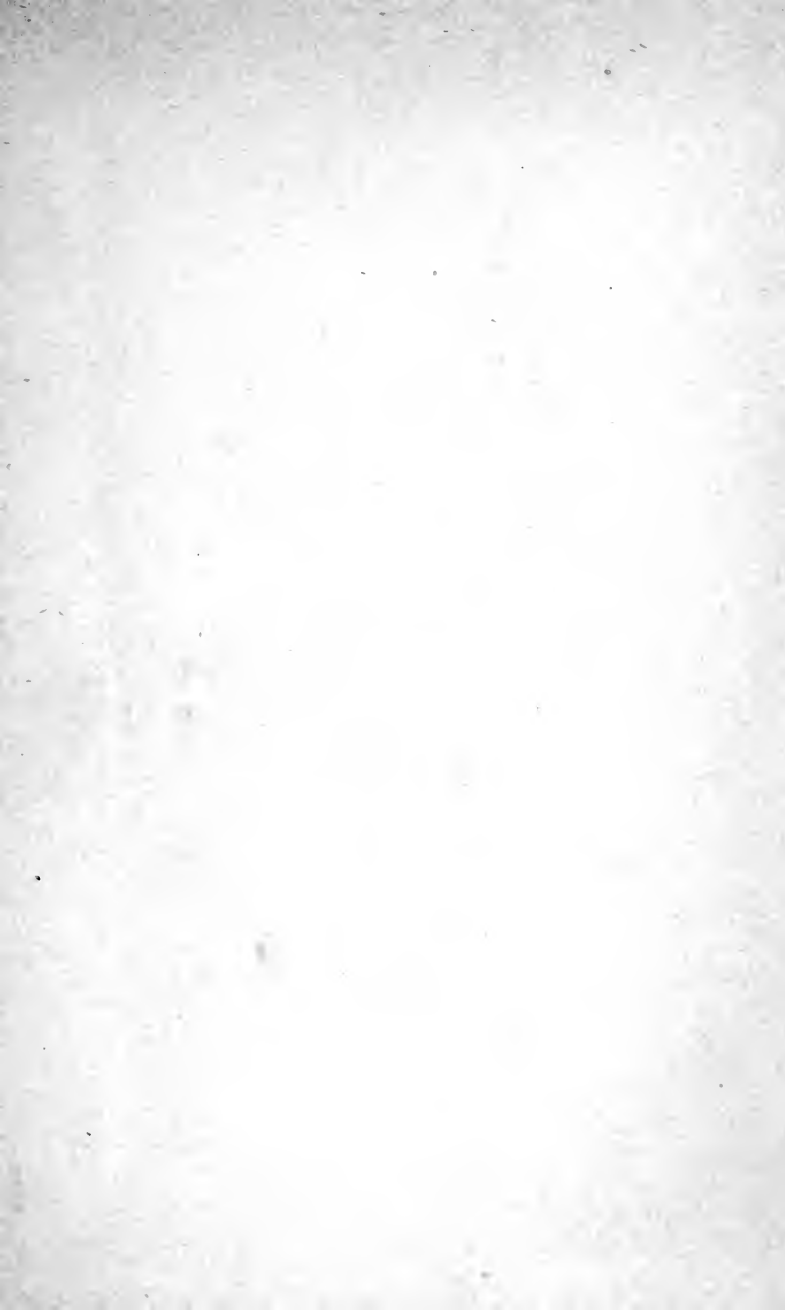
"He is the Curé," said Edmond gloomily.

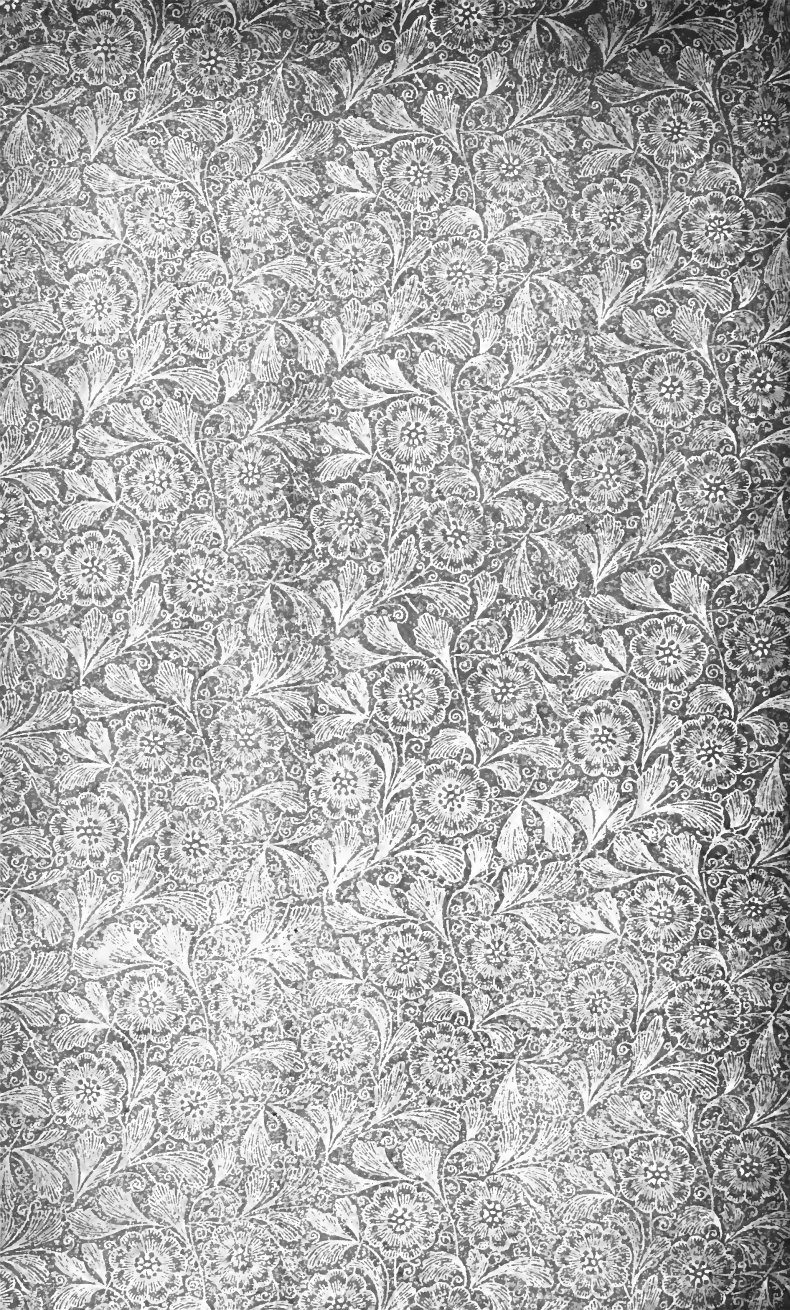
"Yes, I fancy so; but of course Madame Boulotte's anxiety is more for her brother than for the girl. She says his business will go to ruin while he is running over the country, however clever the new house-keeper may be."

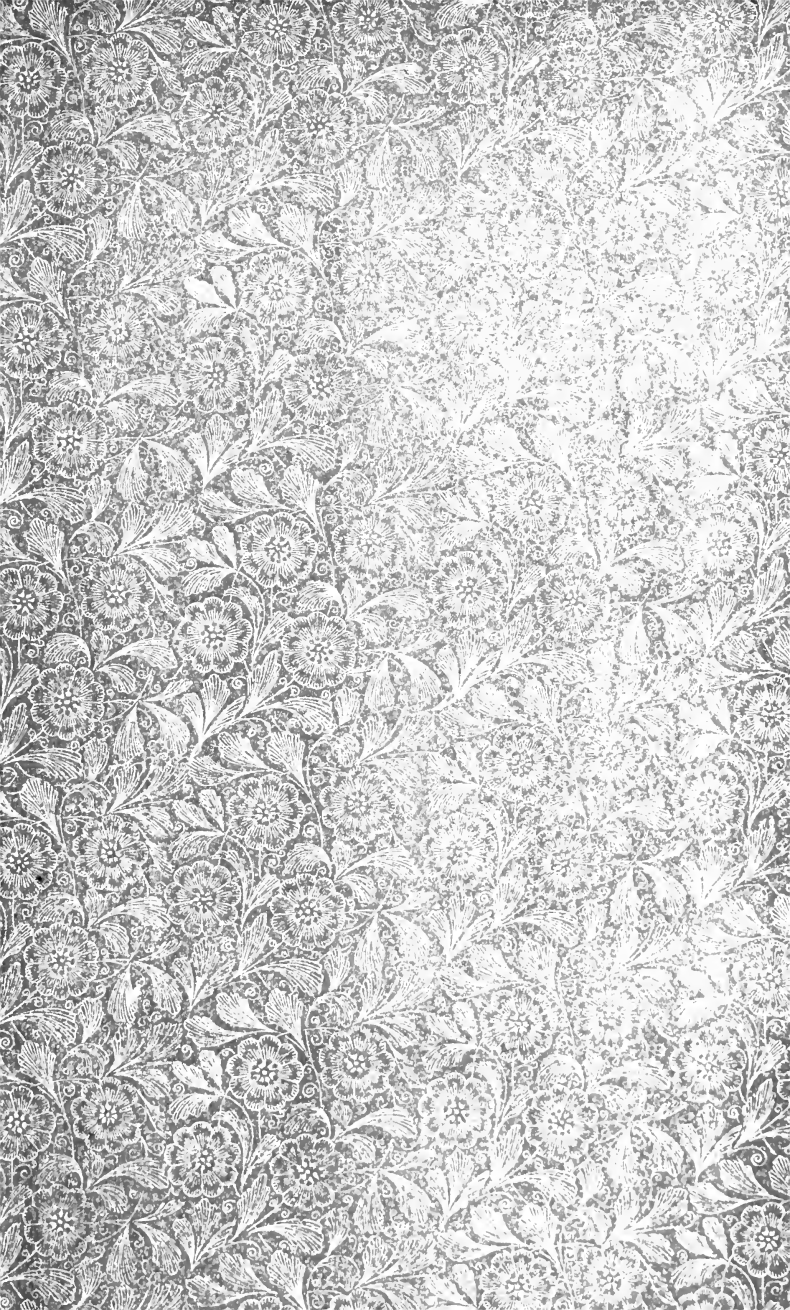
"Curse him!" said Edmond, "his sister must be a fool to be anxious about him, it is part of the business of a photographer to travel."

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.









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